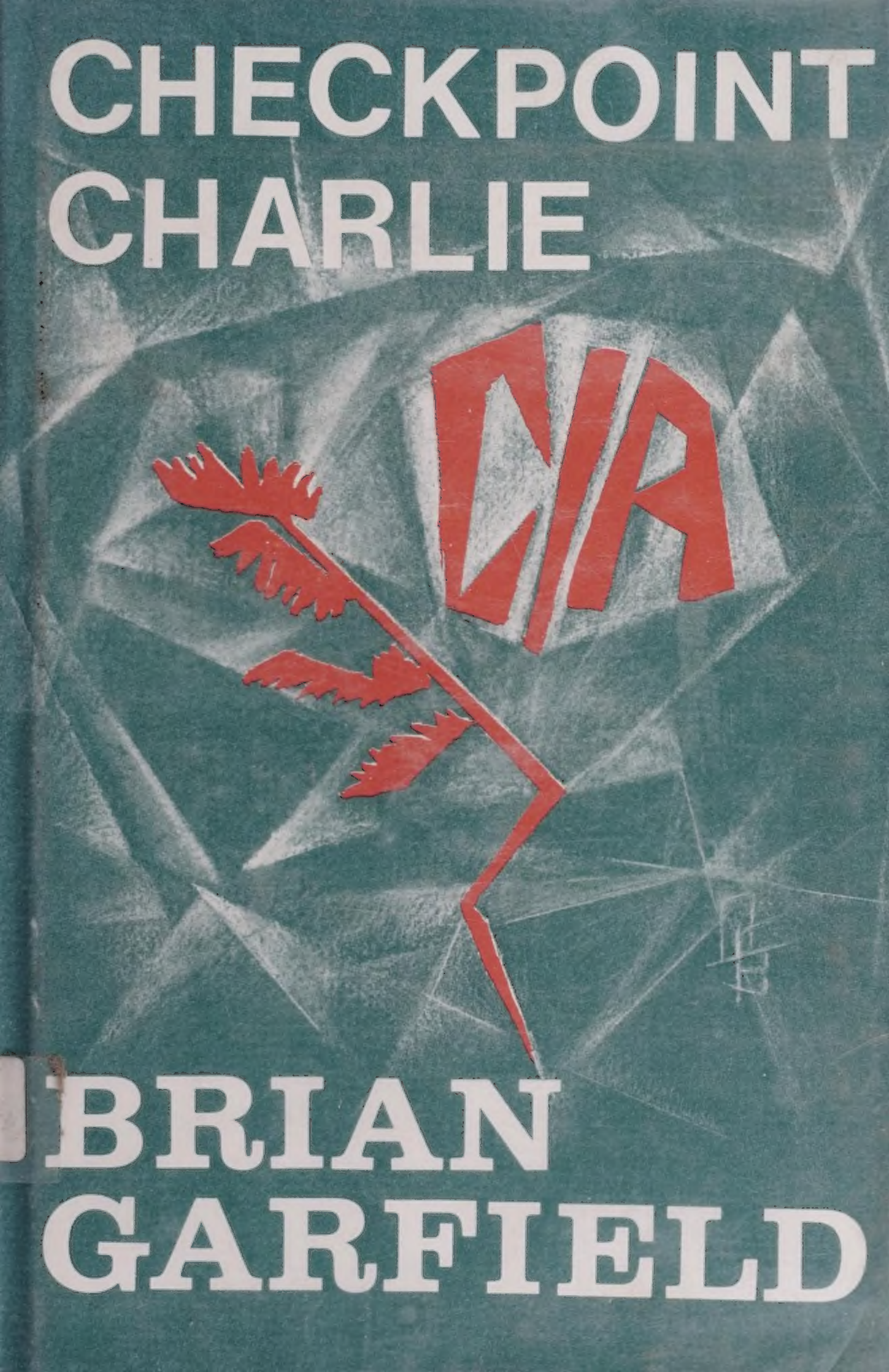
CHECKPOINT CHARLIE



BRIAN GARFIELD

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Checkpoint Charlie

by Brian Garfield

He's fat.

He's old.

He's conceited.

He's rumpled.

He inhabits a violent world—the CIA—yet he is non-violent.

He loves two things, and only two, in all the world: eating and practicing his trade.

He is an international troubleshooter, and he's the best there is.

He is Charlie Dark.

The gang from *Hopscotch* is back, with Charlie Dark replacing Miles Kendig as the loner, the misfit who doesn't fit the buttoned-down image of the Agency.

His superior, Myerson, is here, and he hates Charlie as much as he hated Kendig.

Cutter and Ross return, and so does Yaskov, the Soviet super-spy.

Checkpoint Charlie is Brian Garfield's brilliant sequel to *Hopscotch,* the novel which won an Edgar Allan Poe award from the Mystery Writers of America in 1976 and was filmed with Walter Matthau in 1980.

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Checkpoint Charlie

by Brian Garfield

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For Alyce Martha
With love

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Charlie's Story

An Introduction by the Author

CHARLIE, who waddles and struts and gloats his way through the stories in this collection, is a character who delights me because of his contradictions. Charlie inhabits a violent world—the CIA—yet he is nonviolent; indeed, he's inept with weapons and scorns them. ("Any fool can shoot people.") He is old and fat, in a genre that conventionally calls for sleek young heroes. He is thunderingly conceited, an amiable know-it-all, in a world that normally allows no room for arrogant prima donnas. He is clever and ratiocinative in a world best known for its blundering screw-ups. He is an iconoclast in an organization that demands conformity. He insists upon working alone, even though the "company" that employs him is one that prizes team spirit and effort. He is intuitive and resourceful in the midst of an organization peopled by dogged data-gathering computer types. He is rumpled in the world of the neat; he is humorous in the world of the witless; he has nerve but not nerves; and his relationship with his boss, whom he refuses to call his "superior," is characterized by mutual hatred and contemptuous loathing, even though the two characters exist in symbiosis: neither can survive without the other.

He is also rather desperate. He really enjoys only two things: eating, and practicing his trade—the trade of

international trouble-shooter and extinguisher of brush-fires; a trade at which he is—and knows he is—the best in the world. Charlie's greatest fear is that he will be fired: forced into ignominious retirement. In order to avoid that inevitable fate, Charlie goes to ever-increasing lengths to prove his inimitable excellence and therefore his indispensability. As he grows ever older and fatter, Charlie must continuously extend the outrageousness of his stunning feats of accomplishment. He is a man under constant desperate challenge; beneath the corpulent surface of self-confidence I believe there is a man very near utter panic.

* * *

In these stories I have made very little effort to conform to the realities of life in the CIA. The Company is a purely fictional setting here; it is no more real than the police force of Inspector Lestrade or the army of the Sad Sack. It simply provides the furniture and props against which Charlie acts out his performances.

But the physical surroundings of most of the stories are quite real. Writing this series of stories has allowed me to make use of places I have visited in my disorganized ramblings about the world. One rarely, for example, has reason to use the island of Attu (at the western tip of the Aleutian Island chain in the Bering Sea) as a setting for fiction but I was there once and, as Charlie's experience in "Charlie in the Tundra" suggests, once is enough. Some of the locales are more commonplace, of course, especially the book's eponymous one in Berlin—it has become a cliché setting for spy stories—but I felt obliged to set a story there simply because of the nice pun on the hero's name.

Several of the stories were written while I was visiting the locales depicted in them; I wrote them on the spot, in longhand. (For some reason I prefer to write short

stories in longhand, novels on the typewriter.) Others were written in retrospect. The first real Charlie story was the one set in Caracas, Venezuela; it was written four or five years after our visit to that city. And in a few stories Charlie finds his way to places I have not yet visited at all (Australia, for instance), but this probably happens because those places are on my agenda for the future.

* * *

IN KEEPING WITH HIS BULK, Charlie—like the elephant—was conceived quite a long time before he was born. His father, so to speak, was Miles Kendig, the hero of my novel *Hopscotch* (1975). Kendig has some of Charlie's characteristics: expertise, intuitive intelligence, iconoclasm, conceit, so forth. But Kendig has already been retired from the CIA before we meet him in *Hopscotch*; the game he plays is against the Agency, rather than within it; and of course Kendig is neither fat nor physically inept. Walter Matthau, who portrays Kendig in the film version of *Hopscotch,* ideally fits my own picture of the character; and I can hardly visualize Walter Matthau as Charlie Dark. Still, in many respects Charlie is a chip off the Kendig block, and indeed some of the subsidiary characters who surround Charlie have been adopted intact from *Hopscotch*: Myerson, Cutter and Ross all played important roles in the original novel, as did Mikhail Yaskov, the Russian superspy.

The bridge between *Hopscotch* and the Charlie stories was a short story of 1976 called "Joe Cutter's Game" in which I brought back Cutter, Ross and Myerson to solve a sticky problem in Dar-es-Salaam. Kendig had dropped out of the picture by then, mainly because I had said everything I wanted to say about him in the original novel, and also because at the end of *Hopscotch* Kendig and the

Agency had parted company permanently; there seemed no point trying to drag him back from wherever he may have disappeared to. In any case "Joe Cutter's Game" was, in format and characters, the prototype for the Charlie stories; therefore, in order to make this collection complete, I have rewritten that story—replacing Cutter with Charlie—and it has become "Charlie's Game," the opening story of this collection. But in the interests of purism I must admit that the first actual Charlie Dark story was the one that appears in second position in this book: "Charlie's Shell Game."

For vague reasons having to do with film copyrights and the like, the names of the subsidiary characters were changed in some of the stories when they appeared originally in magazines (*EQMM* and *AHMM*): Myerson, who is Charlie's irascible boss, became "Rice" in some of the magazine stories, and Leonard Ross became "Leonard Myers" in a curious reversal. In this present collection I have changed all the names back to the originals because those are the names by which I know the characters.

The stories appear in this book in the order in which they were written. All but the last story appeared originally in magazines. The last story—"Charlie's Last Caper"—is a new story written expressly for the book; it puts a sort of cap on the collection. That story will not appear in magazines, because in a way it does conclude Charlie's story and I'm not quite sure I'm ready to end the series so abruptly. I think of a collection in book form as a sort of alternative universe; what happens here in the book need not necessarily have happened in the magazines; therefore I feel free to write Charlie's further adventures in the future. I do believe he will return sometime, although at the moment I have no specific plans for further stories

about him. Perhaps he and I need to get a bit older together and see how the world looks then.

* * *

THIS IS A BOOK of fiction about one character but it is not a novel; it is not at all the sort of thing it might have been if I'd chosen to write a novel in twelve or fourteen chapters about Charlie Dark. One brings different muscles to the two tasks. Each of these stories was written independently of the others and each is essentially a self-contained exercise—a puzzle or game, rather than the sort of inquiry into human affairs that one is more likely to find in a novel.

Charlie is a con man. He indulges in capers in which he can outwit his opponents by guile and wit. These stories are conceits—they hinge on their plots and maguffins—and they were written for fun and I make no apology for their lack of profundity.

Normally I have no patience with continuing series of yarns about the same characters. Many writers are happy to devote their lives to the production of lengthy series of novels and stories all of which put the same characters into repetitively similar situations: the detective genre is particularly crowded with such series. As a reader I enjoy some of them but as a writer I sometimes suspect that the authors of those series are taking the easy way out: they've opted for security and some of them appear to intend to keep doing it until they get it right. For myself, on the few occasions when I've written sequels I've found that it was sheer tedium to try to write an entire new novel about a character about whom I'd already said whatever important things I'd wanted to say; such sequels, for me, have invariably proven lackluster.

I would not perpetuate Charlie if my only interest in the

stories were Charlie's character; and I could not do it if Charlie were a character in a novel. What keeps the stories alive in my imagination is the challenge of coming up with new worlds for Charlie to conquer. Charlie is a game-player. Each of these stories deals him a new hand of cards to play—as if he were a poker player. A poker game lasts but a few hours, of course; and a short story can be written in a few hours. One would not care to play poker without interruption for six months at a time; similarly, one would not care to spend six months writing a novel about a game one has played before. After a while the hands must all begin to look the same; the game only remains exciting when it is played at infrequent intervals, and briefly.

* * *

In a slightly different form, "Charlie's Game"—the opening yarn of this book—was the first story I ever wrote for a magazine. I'd written dozens of short stories in my teens but the magazine publishers of the time did not realize what they were missing by turning me down; all I ever had to show for any of those stories was rejection slips. My first publication was a novel, in 1960, and thereafter I made my living as a writer of books (and, later, films) without ever selling a short story to a magazine until, in 1976, Eleanor Sullivan—managing editor of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and editor of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*—insisted that I try my hand at the short form. Had it not been for Eleanor's amiable badgering, and that of Fred ("Ellery Queen") Dannay, it never would have occurred to me to begin writing these stories. In a way, therefore, Fred and Eleanor are Charlie's godparents.

I hope the book justifies their faith in Charlie.

* * *

Charlie's Game

WHEN I TURNED THE CORNER I saw Leonard Ross going into Myerson's office ahead of me. By the time I reached the door I heard Ross say, "Where's Charlie?"

"Late. As usual. Shut the door."

Late. As usual. As far as I could remember—and I have phenomenal recall—there had been only one time when I had been late arriving in Myerson's office and that had been the result of a bomb scare that had grounded everything for three hours at Tempelhof. His acidulous remark had been a cheap shot. But then that was Myerson.

Ross was shutting the door in my face when I pushed in past him and kicked it closed. Ross said, "Hello, Mr. Dark."

Myerson only glanced up from the desk. Then he went on pretending to read something in a manila file folder. I said, "Welcome back, Charlie," in an effort to prompt him but he ignored it and I decided to play his silly game so I dropped my raincoat across a chair and squeezed into one of the tubular steel armchairs and perused the photos on the wall, waiting him out.

The room was stale with Myerson's illegal Havana smoke; it was a room that obviously was unnerving to youngsters like Leonard Ross because among Myerson's varied and indeterminate functions was that of hatchet man. Any audience with him might turn out to be one's

last: fall into disfavor with him and one could have a can tied to one's tail at any time, Civil Service or no Civil Service; and as junior staff, Ross had no illusions about his right to tenure. I had none myself: I was there solely at Myerson's sufferance, but that was something else—he could fire me any time he chose to but he was never going to choose to because he needed me too much and he knew it.

His rudeness meant nothing; that was what passed for amiability with Myerson. I gave Ross a glance and switched it meaningfully toward a chair and finally Ross sat down, perching uneasily on the edge of it.

The view from Myerson's window isn't terribly impressive. An enormous parking lot and, beyond it, a hedgerow of half-wilted trees. Here and there you can see the tops of the high-rises around Langley.

Finally he closed the file and looked at me. "You're late."

"Would you care for a note from my mother explaining my tardiness?"

"Your sarcasms seldom amuse me."

"Then don't provoke them."

pattern over Dulles."

"You are," he said, "preposterously fat."

"And you are a master of the non sequitur."

"You disgust me, do you know that?" He turned to young Ross. "He disgusts me. Doesn't he disgust you?"

Ross made embarrassed gestures and I said, "Don't put the kid on the spot. What's on?"

Myerson wasn't in a particularly savage mood, obviously, because he gave up trying to goad me with no more prompting than that. He tapped the manila folder with a fingertip. "We've got a signal from Arbuckle."

"Where's Arbuckle?"

"East Africa. You really ought to try to keep up on the postings in your own department."

Ross explained to me, "Arbuckle's in Dar-es-Salaam."

"Thank you."

Ross's impatience burst its confines and he turned to Myerson: "What's the flap, then?"

Myerson made a face. "It distresses me, Ross, that you're the only drone in this department who doesn't realize that words like 'flap' became obsolete sometime before you were born."

I said, "If you're through amusing yourself maybe you could answer the young man's question."

Myerson squinted at me; after a moment he decided not to be affronted. "As you may know, affairs in Tanzania remain sensitive. Especially since the Uganda affair. The balance is precarious—a sort of three-sided teeter-totter: ourselves, the Soviets and the Chinese. It would require only a slight upheaval to tip the bal—"

"Can't you spare us the tiresome diplomatic summaries and get down to it?"

Myerson coolly opened the file, selected a photograph and held it up on display. "Recognize the woman?"

To Ross I suppose it was only a badly focused black-and-white of a thin woman with attractive and vaguely Oriental features, age indeterminate. But I knew her well enough. "Marie Lapautre."

"Indeed."

Ross leaned forward for a closer look. I imagine it may have been the first time he'd ever seen a likeness of the dragon lady, whose reputation in our world was something like that of John Wesley Hardin in the days of the gunslingers.

"Arbuckle reports she's been seen in the lobby of the Kilimanjaro in Dar. Buying a picture post card," Myerson added drily.

I said, "Maybe she's on vacation. Spending some of the

blood money on travel like any well-heeled tourist. She's never worked that part of the world, you know."

"Which is precisely why someone might hire her if there were a sensitive job to be done there."

"That's all we've got? Just the one sighting? No evidence of a caper in progress?"

"If we wait for evidence it could arrive in a pine box. I'd prefer not to have that sort of confirmation." He scowled toward Ross. "Fidel Castro, of course, has been trying to persuade Tanzania to join him in leading the Third World toward the Moscow sphere of influence, but up to now the Nyerere regime has maintained strict neutrality. We have every reason to wish that it continue to do so. We want the status to remain quo. That's both the official line and the under-the-counter reality."

Ross was perfectly aware of all that, I'm sure, but Myerson enjoys exposition. "The Chinese aren't as charitable as we are toward neutralists," Myerson went on, "particularly since the Russian meddlings in Angola and Ethiopia. The Chinese want to increase their influence in Africa—that's confirmed in recent signals from the Far East. Add to this background the presence of Marie Lapautre in Dar-es-Salaam and I believe we must face the likelihood of an explosive event. Possibly you can forecast the nature of it as well as I can?"

The last question was addressed to me, not Ross. I rose to meet it without much effort. "Assuming you're right, I'd buy a scenario in which Lapautre's been hired to assassinate one of the top Tanzanian officials. Not Nyerere—that would provoke chaos. But one of the others. Probably one who leans toward the Russian or Chinese line."

Ross said, "What?"

I told him, "They'd want to make the assassination look like an American plot."

Myerson said, "It wouldn't take any more than that to tilt the balance over toward the East."

"Deal and double deal," Ross said under his breath in disgust.

"It's the way the game is played," Myerson told him. "If you find it repugnant I'd suggest you look for another line of work." He turned to me: "I've booked you two on the afternoon flight by way of Zurich. The assignment is to prevent Lapautre from embarrassing us."

"All right." That was the sum of my response; I didn't ask any questions. I pried myself out of the chair and reached for my coat.

Ross said, "Wait a minute. Why not just warn the Tanzanians? Tell them what we suspect. Wouldn't that get us off the hook if anything did happen?"

"Hardly," Myerson said. "It would make things worse. Don't explain it to him, Charlie—let him reason it out for himself. It should be a useful exercise for him. On your way now—you've barely got time to make your plane."

* * *

By the time we were belted into our seats Ross thought he had it worked out. "If we threw them a warning and then somebody got assassinated, it would look like we did it ourselves and tried to alibi it in advance. Is that what Myerson meant?"

"Go to the head of the class." I gave him the benediction of my saintly smile. Ross is a good kid: not stupid, merely inexperienced. He has sound instincts and good moral fibre, which is more than can be said for most of the Neanderthals in the Company. I explained, "Things are touchy in Tanzania. There's an excess of suspicion toward *auslanders*—they've been raided and occupied by Portuguese slave traders and German soldiers and British

colonialists and you can't blame them for being xenophobes. You can't tell them things for their own good. Our only option is to neutralize the dragon lady without anyone's knowing about it."

He gave me a sidewise look. "Can we pin down exactly what we mean by that word 'neutralize'?"

I said, "Have you ever killed a woman?"

"No. Nor a man, for that matter."

"Neither have I. And I intend to keep it that way."

"You never even carry a piece, do you, Charlie."

"No. Any fool can shoot people."

"Then how can we do anything about it? We can't just ask her to go away. She's not the type that scares."

"Let's just see how things size up first." I tipped my head back against the paper antimacassar and closed my eyes and reviewed what I knew about Marie Lapautre—fact, rumor and legend garnered from various briefings and shoptalk along the corridors in Langley.

She had never been known to botch an assignment.

French father, Vietnamese mother. Born 1934 on a plantation west of Saigon. Served as a sniper in the Viet Minh forces at Dienbienphu. Ran with the Cong in the late 1960s with assignments ranging from commando infiltration to assassinations of village leaders and then South Vietnamese officials. Seconded to Peking in 1969 for specialized terrorist instruction. Detached from the Viet Cong, inducted into the Chinese Army and assigned to the Seventh Bureau—a rare honor. Seconded as training cadre to the Japanese Red Army, a terrorist gang. It was rumored Lapautre had planned the tactics for the bombings at Tel Aviv Airport in 1975. During the past seven or eight years Lapautre's name had cropped up at least a dozen times in reports I'd seen dealing with unsolved assassinations in Laos, Syria, Turkey, Libya, West Germany, Lebanon and elsewhere.

Marie Lapautre's weapon was the rifle. At least seven of the unsolved assassinations had been effected with long-range fire from Kashkalnikov sniper rifles—the model known to be Lapautre's choice.

She was forty-five years old, five feet four, one hundred and five pounds, black hair and eyes, mottled burn scar on back of right hand. Spoke five languages, including English. Ate red meat barely cooked when the choice was open. She lived between jobs in a 17th century villa on the Italian Riviera—a home she had bought with funds reportedly acquired from hire-contract jobs as a freelance. Five of the seven suspected assassinations with Kashkalnikovs had been bounty jobs and the other two probably had been unpaid because she still held a commission in Peking's Seventh Bureau.

We had met, twice and very briefly; both times on neutral ground—once in Singapore, once in Teheran. In Singapore it had been a diplomatic reception; the British attaché had introduced us and stood by watching with amusement while we sized each other up like rival gladiators but it had been nothing more than a few minutes of inconsequential pleasantries and then she had drifted off on the arm of a Malaysian black marketeer.

The files on her were slender and all we really knew was that she was a professional with a preference for the 7.62mm Kashkalnikov and a reputation for never missing a score. By implication I added one other thing: if Lapautre became aware of the fact that two Americans were moving in to prevent her from completing her present assignment she wouldn't hesitate to kill us—and naturally she would kill us with proficient dispatch.

* * *

THE FLIGHT was interminable. I ate at least five meals. We had to change planes in Zurich and from there it was

another nine hours. I noticed that Ross was having trouble keeping his eyes open by the time we checked into the New Africa Hotel.

It had been built by the Germans when Tanganyika had been one of the Kaiser's colonies and it had been rebuilt by Africans to encourage business travel; it was comfortable enough and I'd picked it mainly for the food, but it happened to be within easy walking distance of the Kilimanjaro where Lapautre had been spotted. Also, unlike the luxurious Kilimanjaro, the New Africa had a middle-class businessman's matter of factness and one didn't need to waste time trying to look like a tourist.

The change in time zones seemed to bewilder Ross. He stumbled groggily when we went along to the shabby export office that housed the front organization for Arbuckle's soporific East Africa station.

A fresh breeze came off the harbor. I've always liked Dar; it's a beautiful port, ringed by palm-shaded beaches and colorful villas on the slopes. Some of the older buildings bespeak a dusty poverty but the city is more modern and energetic than anything you'd expect to find near the equator on the shore of the Indian Ocean. There are jams of hooting traffic on the main boulevards. Businessmen in various shadings: Europeans, turbaned Arabs, madrassed Asians, black Africans in tribal costumes. Now and then a four-by-four lorry growls by carrying a squad of soldiers but the place hasn't got that air of police-state tension that makes the hairs crawl on the back of my neck in countries like Paraguay and East Germany. It occurred to me as we reached Arbuckle's office that we hadn't been accosted by a single beggar.

It was crowded in among cubbyhole curio shops selling African carvings and cloth. Arbuckle was a tall man, thin and bald and nervous; inescapably he was known in the

Company as Fatty. He had one item to add to the information we'd arrived with: Lapautre was still in Dar.

"She's in room four eleven at the Kilimanjaro but she takes most of her dinners in the dining room at the New Africa. They've got better beef."

"I know."

"Yeah, you would. Watch out you don't bump into her there. She must have seen your face in dossiers."

"We've met a couple of times. But I doubt she'd know Ross by sight."

Ross was grinding knuckles into his eye sockets. "Sometimes it pays to be unimportant."

"Hang onto that thought," I told him. When we left the office I added, "You'd better go back to the room and take the cure for that jet lag."

"What about you?"

"Chores and snooping. And dinner, of course. I'll see you at breakfast. Seven o'clock."

"You going to tell me what the program is?"

"I see no point discussing anything at all with you until you've had a night's sleep."

"Don't *you* ever sleep?"

"When I've got nothing better to do."

I watched him slouch away under the palms. Then I went about my business.

* * *

THE BREAKFAST layout was a nice array of fruits, juices, breads, cold cuts. I had heaped a plate full and begun to consume it when Ross came puffy-eyed down to the second-floor dining room and picked his way through the mangoes and sliced ham. He eats like a bird.

The room wasn't crowded; a sprinkling of businessmen and a few Americans in safari costumes that appeared to

have been tailored in Hollywood. I said mildly to Ross when he sat down, "I picked the table at random," by which I meant that it probably wasn't bugged. I tasted the coffee and made a face; you'd think they could make it better—after all they grow the stuff there. I put the cup down. "All right. We've got to play her cagey and careful. If anything blows loose there won't be any cavalry to rescue us."

"Us?"

"Did you think you were here just to feed me straight lines, Ross?"

"Well, I kind of figured I was mainly here to hold your coat. On-the-job training, you know."

"It's a two-man job. Actually it's a six-man job but the two of us have got to carry it."

"Wonderful. Should I start practicing my quick draw?"

"If you'd stop asking droll questions we'd get along a little faster."

"All right. Proceed, my general."

"First the backgrounding. We're jumping to a number of conclusions based on flimsy evidence but it can't be helped." I enumerated them on my fingers. "We assume, one, that she's here on a job and not just to take pictures of elephants. Two, that it's a Seventh Bureau assignment. Three, that the job is to assassinate someone—after all, that's her principal occupation. Four, that the target may be a government leader here, but not Nyerere. We don't know the timetable so we have to assume, five, that it could happen at any moment. Therefore we must act quickly. Are you with me so far?"

"So far, sure."

"We assume, six, that the local Chinese station is unaware of her mission."

"Why should we assume that?"

"Because they're bugging her room."

Ross gawked at me.

I am well past normal retirement age and I'm afraid it is not beneath me to gloat at the weaknesses of the younger generations. I said, "*I* didn't waste the night sleeping."

He chewed a mouthful, swallowed, squinted at me. "All right. You went through the dragon lady's room, you found a bug. But what makes you think it's a Chinese bug?"

"I found not one bug but three. One was ours—up-to-date equipment and I checked it out with Arbuckle. Had to get him out of bed; he wasn't happy but he admitted it's our bug. The second was American-made but obsolescent. Presumably placed in the room by the Tanzanian secret service—we sold a batch of that model to them about ten years ago. The third mike was made in Sinkiang Province, one of those square little numbers they must have shown you in tech briefings. Satisfied?"

"Okay. No Soviet agent worth his vodka would stoop to using a bug of Chinese manufacture, so that leaves the Chinese. So the local Peking station is bugging her room and that means either they don't know why she's here or they don't trust her. Go on."

"They're bugging her because she's been known to free-lance. Naturally they're nervous. But you're mistaken about one thing. They definitely don't know why she's here. The Seventh Bureau never tells anyone anything. So the local station wants to find out who she's working for and who she's gunning for. The thing is, Ross, as far as the local Chinese are concerned she could easily be down here on a job for Warsaw or East Berlin or London or Washington or some Arab oil sheikh. They just don't know, do they?"

"Go on."

"Now the Tanzanians are bugging her as well and that means they know who she is. She's under surveillance. That means we have to act circumspectly. We can't make waves that might splash up against the presidential palace. When we leave here we leave everything exactly as we found it, all right? Now then. More assumptions. We assume, seven, that Lapautre isn't a hipshooter. If she were she wouldn't have lasted this long. She's careful, she cases the situation before she steps into it. We can use that caution of hers. And finally, we assume, eight, that she's not very well versed in surveillance technology." Then I added, "That's a crucial assumption, by the way."

"Why? How can we assume that?"

"She's never been an intelligence gatherer. Her experience is in violence. She's a basic sort of creature—a carnivore. I don't see her as a scientific whiz. She uses an old-fashioned sniper's rifle because she's comfortable with it—she's not an experimenter. She'd know the rudiments of electronic eavesdropping but when it comes to sophisticated devices I doubt she's got much interest. Apparently she either doesn't know her room is bugged or knows it but doesn't care. Either way it indicates the whole area is outside her field of interest. Likely there are types of equipment she doesn't even know about."

"Like for instance?"

"Parabolic reflectors. Long-range directionals."

"Those are hardly ultrasophisticated. They date back to World War II."

"But not in the Indochinese jungles. They wouldn't be a part of her experience."

"Does it matter?"

"I'm not briefing you just to listen to the sound of my dulcet baritone voice, Ross. The local Chinese station is equipped with parabolics and directionals."

"I see." He said it but he obviously didn't see. Not yet. It was getting a bit tedious leading him along by the nose but I liked him and it might have been worse: Myerson might have sent along one of the idiot computer whiz-kids who are perfectly willing to believe the earth is flat if an IBM machine says it is.

I said, "You're feeding your face and you look spry enough but are you awake? You've got to memorize your lines fast and play your part perfectly the first time out."

"What are you talking about?"

* * *

ACCORDING TO PLAN Ross made the phone call at nine in the morning from a coin box in the cable office. He held the receiver out from his ear so I could eavesdrop. A clerk answered and Ross asked to be connected to extension four eleven; it rang three times and was picked up. I remembered her voice right away: low and smoky. "*Oui?*"

"Two hundred thousand dollars, in gold, deposited to a Swiss account." That was the opening line because it was unlikely she'd hang up on us right away after that teaser. "Are you interested?"

"Who is this?"

"Clearly, Mademoiselle, one does not mention names on an open telephone line. I think we might arrange a meeting, however. It's an urgent matter."

Ross's palm was visibly damp against the receiver. I heard the woman's voice: "For whom are you speaking, M'sieur?"

"I represent certain principals." Because she wouldn't deal directly with anyone fool enough to act as his own front man. Ross said, "You've been waiting to hear from me, *n'est-ce-pas?*" That was for the benefit of those who were bugging her phone; he went on quickly before she

could deny it: "At noon today I'll be on the beach just north of the fishing village at the head of the bay. I'll be wearing a white shirt, short sleeves; khaki trousers and white plimsolls. I'll be alone and of course without weapons." I saw him swallow quickly.

The line seemed dead for a while but finally the woman spoke. "Perhaps."

Click.

"Perhaps," Ross repeated dismally, and cradled it.

* * *

DRIVING US NORTH in the rent-a-car he said to me, "She didn't sound enthusiastic, did she. You think she'll come?"

"She'll come."

"What makes you think so?"

"Without phone calls like that she wouldn't be able to maintain her standard of living."

"But if she's in the middle of setting up a caper here—"

"It doesn't preclude her from discussing the next job. She'll come."

"Armed to the teeth, no doubt," Ross muttered.

"No. She's a pro. A pro never carries a gun when he's not on a job—a gun can get you into too much trouble if it's discovered. But she's probably capable of dismantling you by hand in a hundred different ways so try not to provoke her until we've sprung the trap."

"You can be incredibly comforting sometimes, you know that?"

"You're green, Ross, and you have a tendency to be flip and you'd better realize this isn't a matter for frivolous heroics. You're not without courage and it's silly to pretend otherwise. But don't treat this thing with childish bravado. There's a serious risk you may end up facedown in the surf if you don't treat the woman with all the caution in the

world. Your job's simple and straightforward and there's nothing funny about it—just keep her interested and steer her to the right place. And for God's sake, remember your lines."

* * *

WE PARKED OFF THE ROAD and walked through the palms toward the edge of the water. The beach was a narrow white strip of perfect sand curving away in a crescent. There was hardly any surf. At the far end of the curve I saw a scatter of thatched huts and a few dilapidated old piers to which were tethered a half dozen primitive outrigger fishing boats. It was pleasantly warm and the air was clear and dry: the East African coast has none of the muggy tropicality of the West one. Two small black children ran up and down the distant sand and their strident voices carried weakly to my ears. The half mile of beach between was empty of visible life. A tourist-poster scene, I thought, but clearly a feeling of menace was preoccupying Ross; I had to steady him with a hand on his shoulder.

Out on the open water, beyond a few small boats floating at anchor, a pair of junks drifted south with the mild wind in their square sails. A dazzling white sport-fisherman with a flying bridge rode the swells in a lazy figure-eight pattern about four hundred yards offshore; two men in floppy white hats sat in the stern chairs trolling lines. Beyond, on the horizon, a tramp prowled northward —a coaster: Tanga next, then Mombasa, so forth. And there was a faint spiral of smoke even farther out—probably the Zanzibar ferry.

I put my back to the view and spoke in a voice calculated to reach no farther than Ross's ears: "Spot them?"

Ross was searching the beach. "Not a soul. Maybe they didn't get the hint."

"The sport fisherman, Ross. They've got telescopes and long-range microphones focused on this beach right now and if I were facing them they'd hear every word I'm saying."

That was why we'd given it several hours' lead time after making the phone call. To give the Chinese time to get in position to monitor the meeting.

"They've taken the bait," I said. "It remains to be seen whether the dragon lady will prove equally gullible."

Ross was carrying the rifle and I crooked a finger and he gave it to me. We were still in the palms, too shadowed for the watchers on the fishing boat to get much of a look at us. I slid back into the deeper shadows and watched Ross begin to walk out along the beach, kicking sand with his toes. He had his hands in his pockets but then thought better of that and took them out again and I applauded him for that—he was making it obvious his hands were empty.

I saw him look at his watch. It was eleven fifty-five. *Don't get too nervous, Ross.* He walked out to the middle of the crescent of sand and stood there looking back inland and I had some idea what he was going through: trying to ignore the fishing boat a quarter of a mile behind him, trying to talk himself out of the acute feeling that someone's telescopic crosshairs were centered between his shoulder blades.

I watched him begin to walk around in an aimless little circle—perhaps he felt they'd have a harder time hitting a moving target. He hadn't much to worry about, actually; they had no reason to take potshots at him—they'd be curious, not murderous—but perhaps Ross was no longer in a state of mind where logic was the ruling factor. I

trusted him to do his part, though. I knew a little about him. He'd come right into the Company after college, seeking adventure and challenge, and if he'd been worried by the stink of the Company's growing notoriety he'd balanced it with a naïve notion that the Company needed people like him to keep it clean. Mainly what I knew about him was that Joe Cutter gave him very high marks and there's nobody in Langley whose judgment I'd sooner trust than Joe's. This caper should have been Joe's by rights—it was more in his line than mine, I'm more of a trouble-shooter and rarely get picked for front-line counter-espionage capers because I'm too visible—but Joe hates Myerson even more than I do and he'd managed to get himself posted out to the Near East away from Myerson's influence.

I heard the putt-putt of an engine and watched a little outboard come in sight around the headland and beat its way forward, its bow gently slapping the water, coming at a good clip. Ross saw it too—looked at it, then looked away, back into the palm trees—probably wondering when the woman would show up. He hadn't yet realized she was already here. I saw him do a slow take and turn on his heel again. Then we both watched the outboard come straight in onto the beach.

It was the dragon lady and she was alone at the tiller. She tipped the engine up across the transom, jumped overside and came nimbly ashore, dragging the boat up onto the sand a bit. Then she turned to look at Ross across the intervening forty yards of sand. I had a good view of her in profile. Ross was trying to meet her stare without guile. Her eyes left him after a bit and began to explore the trees. I didn't stir; I was in among a cluster of palm boles and the thing she'd spot first would be movement.

She made a thorough job of it before she turned toward

Ross. She walked with lithe graceful strides: petite but there was nothing fragile about her. She wore an *ao dai,* the simple formfitting dress of Indochina; it was painted to her skin and there was no possibility she could have concealed a weapon under it. Perhaps she wore it for that reason.

Ross didn't move. He let her come to him. It was in his instructions.

I was near enough to hear them because the offshore breeze carried their voices to me.

"Well then, M'sieur."

"The money," Ross began, and then he stopped, tongue-tied.

Christ. He'd forgotten his lines.

"*Oui?*"

He looked away from her. Perhaps it was the glimpse of the white sport boat out there that galvanized him. I heard him speak clearly and calmly: "The money's on deposit and we have the receipt and the numbered account book. If you do the job you'll be given both of them. Two hundred thousand American dollars in gold. That works out to something over half a million Swiss francs at the current rate."

She said, "I would need a bit more information than that."

"The name of the target, of course. The deadline date by which the assignment must be completed. More than that you don't need." Ross kept his face straight. I had a feeling he was feverishly rehearsing the rest of his lines.

She said, "You've left out one thing."

"I don't think so, Mlle. Lapautre."

"I must know who employs me."

"Not included in the price of your ticket, I'm afraid."

"Then we've wasted our morning, both of us."

"For two hundred thousand dollars we expected a higher class of discretion than you seem inclined to exercise." It was a line I had drilled into him and apparently he hadn't liked it—it went against his usual mode of expression—but I had insisted on the precise wording, and now she responded as I'd said she would: it was as if I'd written her dialogue as well as Ross's.

She said, "Discretion costs a little more, M'sieur, especially if it concerns those whom I might regard as my natural enemies. You *are* American."

"I am. That's not to say my principals are."

The thing is, Ross, you don't want to close the door, you want to keep her talking. String her along, whet her curiosity. She's going to insist on more information. Stall. Stretch it out. Don't give her the name of the target until she's in position.

Casually Ross put his hands in his pockets and turned away from her. I watched him stroll very slowly toward me. He didn't look back to see if she was following him. He spoke in a normal tone so that she'd have trouble hearing him against the wind if she let him get too far ahead of her. "My principals are willing to discuss the matter more directly with you if you agree to take the job on. Not a face-to-face meeting, of course, but one of them may be willing to speak to you on a safe line. Coin telephones at both ends—you know the drill."

It was working. She was trailing along, moving as casually as he was. Ross threw his head back and stared at the sky. I saw what she couldn't see—Ross wetting his lips nervously. "The target isn't a difficult one. The security measures aren't too tough."

"But he's important, isn't he. Visible. Otherwise the price would not be so high."

It was something I hadn't forecast for him and I wasn't

sure Ross would know how to handle it but he did the right thing: he made no reply at all. He just kept drifting toward the palms, off on a tangent from me now, moving in seemingly aimless half circles. After a moment he said, "Of course you weren't followed here." It was in the script.

"Why do you think I chose to come by open boat? No one followed me. Can you say the same?"

Position.

Ross turned and she moved alongside. She had, as I had predicted, followed his lead: it was Indochinese courtesy, inbred and unconscious—the residue of a servile upbringing.

She stood beside him now a few feet to his right; like Ross she was facing the palm trees.

Ross dropped his voice and spoke without turning his head; there was no possibility the microphones on the boat would hear him. I barely caught his words myself, and I was only about thirty feet downwind of him. "Don't speak for a moment now, Mademoiselle. Look slightly to your right—the little cluster of palm trees."

She was instantly alert and suspicious; I saw her face come around and I stirred a bit and it was enough to make her spot me. Then I leveled the rifle, aiming down the sights.

In the same guarded low voice Ross said, "It's a Mannlicher bolt action with high-speed ammunition. Hollowpoint bullets and he's an expert marksman. You'd stand no chance at all if you tried to run for it." Ross kept stepping back because I'd told him not to let her get close enough to jump him and use him for a shield. Yet he had to stay within voice range because if he lifted his tone or turned his head the fine-focus directional mike on the sport fishing boat would pick up his words immediately.

I saw her shoulders drop half an inch and felt relief. *If*

she doesn't break for it in the first few seconds she won't break at all. She's a pro and a pro doesn't fight the drop.

"You're in a box, Mlle. Lapautre. You've got one way to get out of it alive. Are you listening to me?"

"Certainly."

"Don't try to figure it out because there are parts of it you'll never know. We're playing out a charade, that's all you need to keep in mind. Play your part as required and you'll walk away alive."

"What do you want, then?"

It was evident that her cool aplomb amazed Ross, even though I'd told him to expect it.

I knew she couldn't have recognized me; most of me was behind one of the palms and all she really could see was a heavyset fellow with a rifle. Because of the angle I was hidden completely from the view of those on board the sport fishing boat. All they'd be able to tell was that Ross and Lapautre were having a conversation in tones too low for their equipment to record. They'd be frustrated and angry but they'd hang on hoping to pick up scraps of words that they could later edit together and make some sense out of.

Ross answered her, *sotto voce:* "I want you to obey my instructions now. In a moment I'm going to step around and face you. The man in the trees will kill you if you make any sudden move, so pay attention. . . . Now I'm going to start talking to you in a loud voice. The things I say may not make much sense to you. I don't care what you say by way of response—but say it quietly so that nobody hears your answers. And I want you to nod your head 'yes' now and then to make it look as if you're agreeing with whatever proposition I make to you. Understand?"

"No," she said, "I do not understand."

"But you'll do as I say, won't you."

"I seem to have little choice." She was looking right at me when she said that.

"That's good enough. Here we go."

Then Ross stepped off to the side and made a careful circle around her, keeping his distance, looking commendably casual. He started talking midway around: "Then we've got a deal. I'm glad you agreed to take it on."

He stopped when he was facing her from her port bow. The woman didn't speak; she only watched him. Ross enunciated clearly and I appreciated that; we both were mindful of the shotgun microphone focused on his lips from four hundred yards offshore.

"I'm glad," he said again. "You're the best in the business, I think everybody knows that."

Her lip curled ever so slightly: an expression exquisite in its subtle contempt. "And just what is it I'm supposed to have agreed to?"

Ross nodded vigorously. "Exactly. When you talk to my principals you'll recognize the Ukrainian accents immediately but I hope that won't deter you from putting your best effort into it."

"This is absurd." But she kept her voice right down. I was aiming the thing straight at her heart.

"That's right," Ross said cheerfully. "There will be no official Soviet record of the transaction. If they're accused of anything naturally they'll deny it so you can see that it's in your own best interests to keep absolutely silent."

"This is pointless. Who can possibly benefit from this ridiculous performance?"

"I think they'll find that acceptable," Ross said. "Now then, about the target. He must be taken out within the next twelve days because that's the deadline for a particular international maneuver the details of which needn't concern you. The target is here in Dar-es-Salaam, so you'll

have plenty of time to set up the assassination. Do you recognize the name Chiang Hsien?"

She laughed then. She actually laughed. "Incredible."

Ross managed to smile. "Yes. The chief of the Chinese station in Dar. Now there's just one more detail."

"Is that all? Thank goodness for that."

Ross nodded pleasantly. "Yes, that's right. You've got to make it look as if it's the work of Americans. I'd suggest you use an American rifle. I leave the other details in your hands, but the circumstantial evidence must point to an American plot against the Chinese people's representative. You understand?"

"Is that all, then?"

"If you still want confirmation I'll arrange for a telephone contact between you and my principals. I think that covers everything, then. It's always pleasant doing business with a professional." With a courtly bow—he might have been Doug Fairbanks himself—Ross turned briskly on his heel and marched away toward the trees without looking back.

I watched the woman walk back to her open boat. The junks had disappeared past the point of land to the south; the outriggers were still tethered in the water by the village; the coastal steamer was plowing north, the Zanzibar ferry's smoke had disappeared—and the two white-hatted men in the stern of the sport fishing boat were packing up their rods and getting out of their swivel chairs. The dragon lady pushed her boat into the surf, climbed over the gunwale, made her way aft and hooked the outboard engine over the transom. She yanked the cord a few times. It sputtered and roared; and she went chugging out in a wide circle toward the open water, angling to starboard to clear the headland.

When she'd gone a couple of hundred yards Ross came through the trees beside me and said, "What happens now?"

"Watch." I smiled at him. "You did a beautiful job, you know."

"Yeah, I know I did."

I liked him for that. I hate false modesty.

The sport fisherman was moving, its engines whining, planing the water: collision course. Near the headland it intercepted the little open outboard boat. The woman tried to turn away but the big white boat leaped ahead of her and skidded athwart her course.

"That skipper knows how to handle her," Ross commented without pleasure.

With no choice left, the woman allowed her boat to be drawn alongside by a long-armed man with a boathook. One of the men in the stern—one of the two with white hats—gave her a hand aboard. She didn't put up a struggle; she was a pro. I saw them push her toward the cabin—they went below, out of sight, and then the two boats disappeared around the headland, one towing the other.

Ross and I walked back to the car; I tossed the rifle into the back seat—we'd drop it off at Arbuckle's. It wasn't loaded. If she'd called our bluff I'd have let her run for it. (There's always another day.)

I said, "They'll milk her of course, but they won't believe a word of it. They've got the evidence on tape and they won't buy her denials. They wouldn't believe the truth in a thousand years and it's all she's got to offer."

Ross leaned against the car, both arms against the roof, head down between his arms. "You know what they'll do to her, don't you. After they squeeze her dry."

I said, "It'll happen a long way from here and nobody will ever know about it."

"And that makes it right?"

"No. It adds another load to whatever we've already got on our consciences. If it makes you feel a little better it's a

form of justice—think of the people she's murdered. She may survive this, you know. She may come out of it alive. But if she does she'll never get another job in that line of work. Nobody'll trust her again."

"It hasn't solved a thing," he complained. He gave me a petulant little boy look. "They'll just send somebody to take her place, won't they? Next week or next month."

"Maybe they will. If they do we'll have to deal with it when it happens. You may as well get used to it, Ross—you play one game, you finish it, you add up the score and then you put the pieces back onto the board and start the next game. That's all there is to it—and that's the fun of it. As long as you stay lucky there's always another game."

Ross stared at me. "I guess there is," he said reluctantly.

We got in the car and Ross turned the key. I smiled briefly, trying to reassure him. The starter meshed and he put it in gear. He said with sudden savagery, "But it's not all that much fun for the losers, is it."

"That's why you should always play to win," I replied.

Ross fishtailed the car angrily out into the road.

* * *

Charlie's Shell Game

By the end of the afternoon I had seen three of them check in at the reception desk and I knew one of them had come to kill me but I didn't know which one.

Small crowds had arrived in the course of the afternoon and I'd had plenty of time to study them while they stood in queues to check in at the reception desk. One lot of sixteen sixteen had come in together from an airport bus – middle-aged couples, a few children, two or three solitary businessmen; tourists, most of them, and sitting in the lobby with a magazine for a prop I wrote them off. My man would be young – late twenties, I knew that much.

I knew his name too but he wouldn't be traveling under it.

Actually the dossier was quite thick; we knew a good deal about him, including the probability that he would come to Caracas to kill me. We knew something of his habits and patterns; we'd seen the corpses that marked his backtrail; we knew his name, age, nationality; we had several physical descriptions – they varied but there was agreement on certain points: medium height, muscularly trim, youthful. We knew he spoke at least four languages. But he hadn't been photographed and we had no fingerprints; he was too clever for that.

Of the check-ins I'd espied at the Tamanaco desk three were possibles – any of them could be my intended assassin.

My job was to take him before he could take me.

* * *

MYERSON HAD SUMMONED ME BACK from Helsinki and I had arrived in Langley at midnight grumpy and rumpled after the long flight but the cypher had indicated red priority so I'd delivered myself directly to the office without pause to bathe or sleep, let alone eat. I was famished. Myerson had taken a look at my stubble and plunged right in: "You're flying to Caracas in the morning. The eight o'clock plane."

"You may have to carry me on board."

"Me and how many weightlifters?" He glanced at the clock above the official photograph of the President. "You've got eight hours. The briefings won't take that long. Anyhow you can sleep on the plane."

"Maybe. I never have," I said, "but then I've never been this exhausted. Have you got anything to eat around here?"

"No. This should perk you up, though—it's Gregorius."

"Is it now."

"I knew you'd wag your tail."

"All right, you have my attention." Then I had to fight the urge to look straight up over my head in alarm: Myerson's smile always provokes the premonition that a Mosler safe is falling toward one's head.

"You've gained it back. Gone off the diet?" Now that he had me hooked in his claws he was happy to postpone the final pounce: like a cat with a chipmunk. I really hate him.

I said, "Crawfish."

"What?"

"It's what you eat in Finland. You take them fresh out of a lake, just scoop them up off the bottom in a wooden box with a chickenwire bottom. You throw them straight into the pot and watch them turn color. I can eat a hundred at a sitting. Now what's this about Caracas and Gregorius?"

"You're getting disgustingly fat, Charlie."

"I've always been fat. As for disgusting, I could diet it off, given the inclination. You, on the other hand, would need to undergo brain surgery. I'd prescribe a prefrontal lobotomy."

"Then you'd have no one left to spice your life."

"Spice? I thought it was hemlock."

"In this case more likely a few ounces of plastique. That seems to be Gregorius' preference. And you do make a splendid target, Charlie. I can picture two hundred and umpty pounds of blubber in flabby pieces along the ceiling. Gregorius would be most gratified."

He'd mentioned Gregorius now; it meant he was ready to get down to it and I slumped, relieved; I no longer enjoy volleying insults with him—they cut too close and it's been a long while since either of us believed they were jokes. Our mutual hatred is not frivolous. But we need each other. I'm the only one he can trust to do these jobs without a screw-up and he's the only one who'll give me the jobs. The slick militaristic kids who run the organization don't offer their plums to fat old men. In any section but Myerson's I'd have been fired years ago—overage, overweight, overeager to stay in the game by the old rules rather than the new. I'm the last of the generation that puts ingenuity ahead of computer print-outs.

They meet once a month on the fifth floor to discuss key personnel reassignments and it's a rare month that goes by without an attempt being made by one of the computer kids to tie a can to my tail; I know for a fact Myerson has saved me by threatening to resign: "If he goes, I go." The ultimatim has worked up to now but as we both get older and I get fatter the kids become more strident and I'm dubious how long Myerson can continue the holding action. It's not loyalty to me, God knows; it's purely his

own self-interest—he knows if he loses me he'll get the sack himself: he hasn't got anybody else in the section who knows how to produce. Nobody worthwhile will work for him. I wouldn't either but I've got no choice. I'm old, fat, stubborn, arrogant and conceited. I'm also the best.

He said, "Venezuela is an OPEC country, of course," and waited to see if I would attend his wisdom—as if the fact were some sort of esoterica. I waited, yawned, looked at my watch. Myerson can drive you to idiocy belaboring the obvious. Finally he went on:

"The oil-country finance ministers are meeting in Caracas this time. Starting Thursday."

"I haven't been on Mars, you know. They have newspapers even in Helsinki."

"Redundancies are preferable to ignorance, Charlie." It is his litany. I doubt he passes an hour, even in his sleep, when that sentence doesn't run through his mind: he's got it on tape up there.

"Will you come to the point?"

"They'll be discussing the next round of oil-price hikes," he said. "There's some disagreement among them. The Saudis and the Venezuelans want to keep the increase down below five percent. Some of the others want a big boost—perhaps twenty-five or thirty percent."

"I plead. Tell me about Gregorius."

"This is getting us there. Trust me."

"Let's see if I can't speed it up," I said. "Of course it's the Mahdis—"

"Of course."

"They want Israel for themselves, they don't want a Palestinian peace agreement, they want to warn the Arab countries that they won't be ignored. What is it, then? They've arranged to have Gregorius explode a room full of Arab leaders in Caracas? Sure. After that the Arab

countries won't be so quick to negotiate a Middle East settlement without Mahdi participation. Am I warm?"

"Scalding. Now I know you're awake."

"Barely."

The Mahdi gang began as an extremist splinter arm of the Black Septemberists. The gang is small but serious. It operates out of floating headquarters in the Libyan desert. There's a long and tedious record of hijackings, terror bombings, assassinations. Nothing unique about that. What makes the gang unusual is its habit of using mercenaries. The Mahdis—they named themselves after the mystic who wiped out Gordon at Khartoum—are Palestinians but they're Bedouins, not Arabs; they're few in number and they're advanced in age compared with the teen-age terrorists of the PLO. The Mahdi staff cadre consists of men who were adults at the time of the 1947 expulsion from Palestine. Some of the sheikhs are in their seventies by now.

Rather than recruit impassioned young fools the gang prefers to hire seasoned professional mercenaries; they get better results that way and they don't need to be concerned about generation-gap factionalism. They are financed by cold-blooded groups of various persuasions and motivations, most of them in Iraq and Germany.

They had used Gregorius at least twice in the past, to my knowledge: the Hamburg Bahnhof murders and the assassination of an Israeli agent in Cairo. The Hamburg bomb had demolished not only a crowd of Israeli trade officials but also the main staircase of the railroad station. The Cairo setup had been simpler, just one victim, blown up when he stepped onto the third stair of his entrance porch.

Gregorius was a killer for hire and he was well paid; apparently his fees were second only to those of Carlos the

Jackal, who had coordinated the Munich athlete murders and the Entebbe hijack; but Gregorius always chose his employment on ideological grounds—he had worked for the PLO, the Baader-Meinhof Group, the Rhodesian rebels, the Cuban secret service, but he'd never taken a job for the West. Evidently he enjoyed fighting his own private war of liberation. Of course he was a psychotic but there was no point dwelling on his lunacy because it might encourage one to underestimate him; he was brilliant.

Myerson said, "We've got it on authority—fairly good authority—that the Mahdis have hired Gregorius for two targets in Caracas. Ministers. The Saudi and the Venezuelan. And of course whatever bonus prizes he may collect—bombs usually aren't too selective."

"How good is 'fairly good'?"

"Good enough to justify my pulling you off the Helsinki station and posting you to Venezuela."

"All right." If he didn't want to reveal the source he didn't have to; it wasn't really my affair. Need-to-know and all that.

Myerson got down to nuts and bolts and that pleased me because he always hurries right through them; they bore him. He has a grand image of himself as the sort of master strategist who leaves tactical detail to junior staff. Unhappily our section's budget doesn't permit any chain of command and Myerson has to do his own staff work and that's why I usually have to go into the field with a dearth of hard information; that's one reason why nobody else will work for him—Myerson never does much homework.

"It could happen anywhere," he concluded. "The airport, a hotel lobby, a state banquet, any of the official ministerial meetings, a limousine. Anywhere."

"Have you alerted Venezuelan security?"

"I didn't have to. But I've established your liaison out of courtesy."

In other words the tip had come from Venezuelan security. And they didn't feel confident of their own ability to contain Gregorius. Very astute of them; most small-nation security chiefs lack the humility to admit it when a job is too big for them.

Myerson continued, in the manner of an afterthought, "Since we don't know where he plans to make the strike we've taken it upon ourselves to—"

"Is that a royal 'we'?"

"No. The fifth floor. As I was saying, it's been decided that our best chance at him is to lure him into the open before the ministers begin the conference. Of course he doesn't tempt easily."

Then he smiled My flesh crawled.

"You're the bait, Charlie. He'll come out for you."

"In other words it's an open secret that I'll be in Caracas and you've spread the word where you know he'll hear it." I brooded at him, hating him afresh. "Maybe you've neglected something."

"Oh?"

"Gregorius is like me in one respect. He's—"

"Young, fast, up-to-date and sexy. Yes indeed, Charlie, you could be twins."

I cut across his chuckle. "He's a professional and so am I. Business comes first. He'd love to nail me. All right. But first he'll do the job he's being paid for."

"Not this time. We've leaked the news that you're being sent down there to terminate him regardless of cost. He thinks you're being set up to nail him *after* he exposes himself by blowing up a few oil ministers. He can't risk that—you got closer to nailing him than anybody else ever has. He knows if you're set on him again you won't turn

loose until you've done the job. And he knows if he sets off a bomb while you're in earshot of it you'll reach him. He needs more lead time than that if he means to get away."

And he smiled again: "He's got to put you out of the way before he goes after the ministers. Once the bombs go off he can't hang around afterwards to take you on. He's got to do it first."

I said, "I've heard stronger reasoning. He's confident of his skills. Suppose he just ignores me and goes ahead with the job as if I weren't there?"

"He hates you too much. He couldn't walk away, could he? Not after Beirut. Why, I believe he hates you even more than I do."

* * *

TWO YEARS EARLIER we'd known Gregorius was in Beirut to blast the Lebanese coalition prime minister. I'd devised one of the cleverer stunts of my long career. In those days Gregorius worked in tandem with his brother, who was six years older and nearly as bright as Gregorius. Our plan was good and Gregorius walked into it but I'd had to make use of Syrian back-up personnel on the alternate entrances to that verminous maze of alleys and one of the Syrians had been too nervous or too eager for glory. He'd started the shooting too early by about seven-tenths of a second and that was all the time Gregorius needed to get away.

Gregorius left his brother behind in ribbons in the alley; still alive today but a vegetable. Naturally Gregorius made efforts afterward to find out who was responsible for the ambush. Within a few weeks he knew my name. And of course Gregorius—that's his code name, not the one he was born with—was Corsican by birth and personal revenge is a religion with those people. I knew one day

he'd have to come for me; I'd lost very little sleep over it—people have been trying to kill me for thirty-five years.

Just before Myerson sent me to the airport he said, "We want him alive, Charlie."

"You're joking."

"Absolutely not. It's imperative. The information in his head can keep the software boys busy for eight months. Alive—it's an order from the fifth floor."

"You've already blindfolded me and sent me into the cage with him and now you want to handcuff me too?"

"Why, Charlie, that's the way you like it best, you old masochist."

He knows me too well.

* * *

I'D WATCHED THEM check in at the hotel desk and I'd narrowed the possibilities to three; I'd seen which pigeonholes the room clerk had taken the keys from so I knew which rooms they were in. I didn't need to look at the register because it wouldn't help me to know what names or passports they were using.

It was like the Mexican Shell Game: three shells, one pea. Under which shell is the pea?

He had to strike at me today because Myerson's computer said so. And it probably had to be the Tamanaco Hotel because I had studied everything in the Gregorius dossier and I knew he had a preference—so strong it was almost a compulsion—for the biggest and best old hotel in a city. Big because it was easy to be anonymous there; best because Gregorius had been born dirt-poor in Corsica and was rich now; old because he had good taste but also because old walls tend to be soundproof. The Tamanaco, in Caracas, was it.

I was making it easy for him, sitting in plain sight in the lobby.

Earlier in the day I'd toured the city with Cartlidge. He looks like his name: all gaunt sinews and knobby joints. We'd traced the route in from the airport through the long mountain tunnel and we'd had a look at the hotel where the Saudi minister was booked in; on my advice the Venezuelans made a last-minute switch and when the Saudi arrived tomorrow morning he'd be informed of the move to another hotel. We had a look at the palace where the conference would take place and I inquired about the choice of halls: to forestall Gregorius the Venezuelans had not announced any selection—there were four suitable conference rooms in the building—and indeed the final choice wouldn't actually be made until about fifteen minutes before the session began. They were doing a good job. I made a few minor suggestions and left them to it.

After lunch we'd set up a few things and then I'd staked myself in the Tamanaco lobby and four hours later I was still there.

Between five and six I saw each of the three again.

The first one spent the entire hour at the pool outside the glass doors at the rear of the lobby. He was a good swimmer with the build and grace of a field-and-track contender; he had a round Mediterranean face, more Italian than French in appearance. He had fair hair cut very short—crew cut—but the color and cut didn't mean anything; you could buy the former in bottles. For the convenience of my own classification I dubbed him The Blond.

The second one appeared shortly after five, crossing the lobby in a flared slim white tropical suit. The heels of his beige shoes clicked on the tiles like dice. He stopped at the side counter to make a phone call—he could have been telephoning or he could have been using it as an excuse to study my abundant profile—and then he went along to the bell captain's desk and I heard him ask the captain to

summon him a taxi, as there weren't any at the curb in front. His voice was deep; he spoke Spanish with a slight accent that could have been French. He had a very full head of brown hair teased into an Afro and he had a strong actorish face like those of Italians who play Roman gigolos in Technicolor films. He went right outside again, presumably to wait for his taxi. I dubbed him The Afro. If he'd actually looked at me I hadn't detected it—he had the air of a man who only looked at pretty girls or mirrors.

The third one was a bit more thickly muscled and his baldness was striking. He had a squarish face and a high pink dome above it. Brynner and Savalas shave their heads; why not Gregorius? This one walked with an athlete's bounce—he came down about half past five in khaki Bermudas and a casual Hawaiian tourist shirt; he went into the bar and when I glanced in on my way past to the gents' he was drinking something tall and chatting up a buxom dark-haired woman whose bored pout was beginning to give way to loose fourth-drink smiles. From that angle and in that light the bald man looked very American but I didn't cross him off the list; I'd need more to go on.

I was characterizing each of them by hair style but it was useless for anything but shorthand identification. Gregorius, when last seen by witnesses, had been wearing his hair long and black, shoulder-length hippie style. None of these three had hair remotely like that but the sightings had been five weeks ago and he might have changed it ten times in the interval.

The Blond was on a poolside chaise toweling himself dry when I returned from the loo to the lobby. I saw him shake his head back with that gesture used more often by women than by men to get the hair back out of their eyes. He was watching a girl dive off the board; he was smiling.

I had both room keys in my pocket and didn't need to stop at the desk. It was time for the first countermove. I went up in the elevator and walked past the door of my own room and entered the connecting room with the key Cartlidge had obtained for me. It was a bit elaborate but Gregorius had been known to hook a detonator to a doorknob and it would have been easy enough for him to stop a chambermaid in the hall: "My friend, the very fat American, I've forgotten the number of his room."

So I entered my room through the connecting door rather than from the hall. The precaution was sensible; I didn't really expect to find anything amiss but I didn't want to risk giving Myerson the satisfaction of hearing how they'd scraped sections of blubber off the ceiling.

Admittedly I am fat but nevertheless you could have knocked me over with a feather at that moment.

Because the bomb was wired to the doorknob.

I looked at it from across the room. I didn't go any closer; I returned to the adjoining room, got the Do Not Disturb placard and went out into the hall and hung the placard on the booby-trapped doorknob. One of the many differences between a professional like Gregorius and a professional like Charlie Dark is that Charlie Dark tends to worry about the possibility that an innocent hotel maid might open the door.

Then I made the call from the phone in the adjoining room. Within ninety seconds Cartlidge was there with his four-man bomb squad. They'd been posted in the basement beside the hotel's wine cellar.

The crew went to work in flak vests and armored masks. Next door I sat with Cartlidge and he looked gloomy. "When it doesn't explode he'll know we defused it." But then he always looks gloomy.

I said, "He didn't expect this one to get me. It's a signal flag, that's all. He wants me to sweat first."

"And are you? Sweating?"

"At this altitude? Heavens no."

"I guess it's true. The shoptalk. You've got no nerves."

"No nerves," I agreed, "but plenty of nerve. Cheer up, you may get his fingerprints off the device."

"Gregorius? No chance."

Any of the three could have planted it. We could ask the Venezuelans to interrogate every employee in the hotel to find out who might have expressed an interest in my room but it probably would be fruitless and in any case Gregorius would know as soon as the interrogations started and it would only drive him to ground. No; at least now I knew he was in the hotel.

Scruples can be crippling. If our positions had been reversed—if I'd been Gregorius with one of three men after me—I'd simply kill all three of them. That's how Gregorius would solve the problem.

Sometimes honor is an awful burden. I feel such an anachronism.

The bomb squad lads carried the device out in a heavy armored canister. They wouldn't find clues, not the kind that would help. We already knew the culprit's identity.

Cartlidge said, "What next?"

"Here," I said, and tapped the mound of my belly, "I know which one he is. But I don't know it here yet." Finger to temple. "It needs to rise to the surface."

"You *know*?"

"In the gut. The gut knows. I have a fact somewhere in there. It's there; I just don't know what it is."

I ordered up two steak dinners from room service and when the tray-table arrived I had Cartlidge's men make sure there were no bombs under the domed metal covers. Then Cartlidge sat and watched with a kind of awed disgust while I ate everything. He rolled back his cuff and

looked at his watch. "We've only got about fourteen hours."

"I know."

"If you spend the rest of the night in this room he can't get at you. I've got men in the hall and men outside watching the windows. You'll be safe."

"I don't get paid to be safe." I put away the cheesecake—both portions—and felt better.

Of course it might prove to be a bullet, a blade, a drop of poison, a garrote, a bludgeon—it could but it wouldn't. It would be a bomb. He'd challenged me and he'd play it through by his own perverse rules.

Cartlidge complained, "There's just too many places he could hide a satchel bomb. That's the genius of plastique—it's so damn portable."

"And malleable. You can shape it to anything." I looked under the bed, then tried it. Too soft: it sagged near collapse when I lay back. "I'm going to sleep on it."

And so I did until shortly after midnight when someone knocked and I came awake with the reverberating memory of a muffled slam of sound. Cartlidge came into the room carrying a portable radio transceiver—a walkie-talkie. "Bomb went off in one of the elevators."

"Anybody hurt?"

"No. It was empty. Probably it was a grenade—the boys are examining the damage. Here, I meant to give you this thing before. I know you're not much for gizmos and gadgets but it helps us all keep in touch with one another. Even cavemen had smoke signals, right?"

"All right." I thought about the grenade in the elevator and then went back to bed.

In the morning I ordered up two breakfasts; while they were en route I abluted and clothed the physique that Myerson detests so vilely. One reason why I don't diet

seriously is that I don't wish to cease offending him. For a few minutes then I toyed with Cartlidge's walkie-talkie. It even had my name on it, printed onto a plastic strip.

When Cartlidge arrived under the little dark cloud he always carries above him I was putting on my best tie and a jaunty face.

"What's got you so cheerful?"

"I lost Gregorius once. Today I'm setting it right."

"You're sure? I hope you're right."

I went down the hall. Cartlidge hurried to catch up; he tugged my sleeve as I reached for the elevator button. "Let's use the fire stairs, all right?" Then he pressed the walkie-talkie into my hand; I'd forgotten it. "He blew up one elevator last night."

"With nobody in it," I pointed out. "Doesn't it strike you as strange? Look, he only grenaded the elevator to stampede me in to using the stairs. I suggest you send your bomb squad lads to check out the stairs. Somewhere between here and the ground floor they'll doubtless find a plastique device wired to a pressure-plate under one of the treads, probably set to detonate under a weight of not less than two hundred and fifty pounds."

He gaped at me, then ran back down the hall to phone. I waited for him to return and then we entered the elevator. His eyes had gone opaque. I pressed the lobby-floor button and we rode down; I could hear his breathing. The doors slid open and we stepped out into the lobby and Cartlidge wiped the sweat off his face. He gave me a wry inquiring look. "I take it you found your fact."

"I think so."

"Want to share it?"

"Not just yet. Not until I'm sure. Let's get to the conference building."

We used the side exit. The car was waiting, engine running, driver armed.

I could have told Cartlidge which one was Gregorius but there was a remote chance I was wrong and I didn't like making a fool of myself.

Caracas is a curiously Scandinavian city—the downtown architecture is modern and sterile; even the hillside slums are colorful and appear clean. The wealth of 20th century oil has shaped the city and there isn't much about its superficial appearance, other than the Spanish-language neon signs, to suggest it's a Latin town. Traffic is clotted with big expensive cars and the boulevards are self-consciously elegant. Most of the establishments in the central shopping district are branches of American and European companies: banks, appliances, coutouriers, Cadillac showrooms. It doesn't look the sort of place where bombs could go off: Terrorism doesn't suit it. One pictures Gregorius and his kind in the shabby crumbling wretched rancid passageways of Cairo or Beirut. Caracas? No; too hygienic.

As we parked the car the walkie-talkies crackled with static. It was one of Cartlidge's lads—they'd found the armed device on the hotel's fire stairs. Any heavy man could have set it off. But by then I was no longer surprised by how indiscriminate Gregorius could be, his chilly indifference to the risk to innocents.

We had twenty minutes before the scheduled arrivals of the ministers. I said, "It'll be here somewhere. The bomb."

"Why?"

"It's the only place he can be sure they'll turn up on schedule. Are the three suspects still under surveillance? Check them out."

He hunched over the walkie-talkie while I turned the volume knob of mine down to get rid of the distracting noise and climbed out of the car and had my look around; I bounced the walkie-talkie in my palm absently while I considered the possibilities. The broad steps of the *palacio*

where the conference of OPEC ministers would transpire were roped off and guarded by dark-faced cops in Sam Brownes. On the wide landing that separated the two massive flights of steps was a circular fountain that sprayed gaily; normally people sat on the tile ring that contained it but today the security people had cleared the place. There wasn't much of a crowd; it wasn't going to be the kind of spectacle that would draw any public interest. There was no television equipment; a few reporters clustered off to one side with microphones and tape recorders. Routine traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian. That was useful because it meant Gregorius wouldn't be able to get in close; there would be no crowd to screen him.

Still, it wasn't too helpful. All it meant was that he would use a remote-control device to trigger the bomb.

Cartlidge lowered the walkie-talkie from his face. "Did you hear?"

"No." I had difficulty hearing him now as well: the fountain made white noise, the constant gnashing of water, and I moved closer to him while he scowled at my own walkie-talkie. His eyes accused me forlornly. "Would it kill you to use it? All three accounted for. One in his room, one at the hotel pool, one in the dining room having his breakfast."

I looked up past the rooftops. I could see the upper floors of the Hotel Tamanaco—it sits on high ground on the outskirts—and beyond it the tiny swaying shape of a cable car ascending the lofty mountain. Cotton ball clouds over the peaks. Caracas is cupped in the palm of the mountains; its setting is fabulous. I said to Cartlidge, "He has a thing about stairs, doesn't he."

"What?"

"The Hamburg Bahnhof—the bomb was on the platform stairway. The Cairo job, again stairs. This morning, the

hotel fire stairs. That's the thing about stairways—they're funnels." I pointed at the flight of stone steps that led up to the portals of the *palacio*. "The ministers have to climb them to get inside."

"Stone stairs. How could he hide a bomb there? You can't get underneath them. Everything's in plain sight."

I brooded upon it. He was right. But it had to be: suddenly I realized it had to be—because I was here and the Saudi's limousine was drawing up at the curb and it meant Gregorius could get both of us with one shot and then I saw the Venezuelan minister walk out of the building and start down the stairs to meet the limousine and it was even more perfect for Gregorius: all three with one explosion. It *had* to be: right here, right now.

Where was the damned thing? Where?

I had the feeling I needed to find the answer within about seven seconds because it was going to take the Venezuelan minister that long to come this far down the steps while the Saudi was getting out of the limousine; already the Venezuelan was nearly down to the fountain and the Saudi was ducking his berobed head and poking a foot out of the car toward the pavement. The entourage of Arab dignitaries had hurried out of the second limousine and they were forming a double column on the steps for the Saudi to walk through; a police captain drew himself to attention, saluting; coming down the stairs the Venezuelan minister had a wide welcoming smile across his austere handsome face.

They'd picked the limousine at random from a motor pool of six. So it couldn't be in the car.

It couldn't be on the steps because the *palacio* had been guarded inside and out for nearly a week and it had been searched half an hour ago by electronic devices, dogs and human eyes.

It couldn't be in the fountain either. That had been too obvious. We'd exercised special care in searching the fountain; it had only been switched on ten minutes earlier. In any case you can't plant a bomb under water because the water absorbs the force of the explosion and all you get is a big bubble and a waterspout.

In other words there was no way for Gregorius to have planted a bomb here. And yet I knew he had done so. I knew where Gregorius was; I knew he had field glasses to his eyes and his finger on the remote-control button that would trigger the bomb by radio signal. When the Saudi met the Venezuelan and they shook hands on the steps not a dozen feet from me Gregorius would set it off.

Six seconds now. The Venezuelan came past the fountain.

The walkie-talkie in my hand crackled with static but I didn't turn it up. The mind raced at Grand Prix speed. If he didn't plant the bomb beforehand—and I knew he hadn't—then there had to be a delivery system.

Five seconds. Gregorius: cold, brutal, neat, ingenious. Then I knew—*I* was the bomb.

Four seconds and my arm swung back. It has been a long time since I threw a football and I had to pray the instinct was still in the arm and then I was watching the walkie-talkie soar over the Venezuelan's head and I could only stand and watch while it lofted and descended. It struck the near lip of the fountain and for a moment it looked ready to fall back onto the stairs but then it tipped over the rim and went into the water.

His reaction time would be slowed by distance and the awkwardness of handling binoculars and the unexpectedness of my move. Instinctively he reached for the trigger button but by the time he pressed it the walkie-talkie had gone into the water. The explosion wasn't loud. Water blistered at the surface and a crack appeared in the surrounding rim;

little spouts began to break through the shattered concrete; a great frothy mushroom of water bubbled up over the surface and cascaded down the steps.

Nobody was hurt.

* * *

WE WENT INTO the hotel fast. I was talking to Cartlidge: "I assume the one who's still upstairs in his room is the blond one with the crew cut."

"How the hell did you know that?"

"He's Gregorius. He had to have a vantage point."

Gregorius was still there in the room because he'd had no reason to believe we'd tumbled to his identity. He was as conceited as I; he was sure he hadn't made any mistake to give himself away. He was wrong, of course. He'd made only one but it was enough.

Cartlidge's bomb squad lads were our flying wedge. They kicked the door in and we walked right in on him and he looked at all the guns and decided to sit still.

His window overlooked the *palacio* and the binoculars were on the sill. I said to Cartlidge, "Have a look for the transmitter. He hasn't had time to hide it too far away."

The Blond said, "What is this about?" All injured innocence.

I said, "It's finished, Gregorius."

He wasn't going to admit a thing but I did see the brief flash of rage in his eyes; it was all the confirmation I needed. I gave him my best smile. "You'll be pleased to talk in time."

They searched him, handcuffed him, gave the room a toss and didn't find anything; later that day the transmitter turned up in a cleaning-supplies cupboard down the hall.

To this day Cartlidge still isn't sure we got the right man because nobody ever told him what happened after we got

Gregorius back to the States. Myerson and I know the truth. The computer kids in Debriefing sweated Gregorius for weeks and finally he broke and they're still analyzing the wealth of information he has supplied. I'd lost interest by that time; my part of it was finished and I knew from the start that I'd got the right man. I don't make that kind of mistake; it didn't need confirmation from the shabby hypodermics of Debriefing. As I'd said to Myerson, "The binoculars on the windowsill clinched it, of course. When the Venezuelan and the Saudi shook hands he planned to trigger it—it was the best way to hit all three of us. But I knew it had to be The Blond much earlier. I suppose I might have arrested him first before we went looking for the bomb but I wasn't absolutely certain."

"Don't lie," Myerson said. "You wanted him to be watching you in his binoculars—you wanted him to know you were the one who defused him. One of these days your brain's going to slow down a notch or two. Next time maybe it'll blow up before you throw it in the pond. But all right, since you're waiting for me to ask—how did you pick the blond one?"

"We knew until recently he'd worn his hair hippie length."

"So?"

"I saw him at the pool toweling himself dry. I saw him shake his head back the way you do when you want to get the hair back out of your eyes. He had a crew cut. He wouldn't have made that gesture unless he'd cut his hair so recently that he still had the old habit."

Myerson said, "It took you twelve hours to figure that out? You *are* getting old, Charlie."

"And hungry. Have you got anything to eat around here?"

"No."

Checkpoint Charlie

I ALWAYS MISTRUST Myerson but never more so than on those occasions when he pulls me off a job that's only half done and drags me back all the way from Beirut or Helsinki or Sydney to hand me a new assignment. Usually it means he's at his wits' end and needs me to bail him out.

This time it was a short trip back to Langley. I'd been in Montreal and consequently managed to arrive at Myerson's lair without the usual jet lag; my only complaint was hunger—there'd been nothing but a light snack on the plane.

It was two in the morning but Myerson keeps odd hours and I knew he'd still be in his fourth-floor office. I trampled the U.S. government seal into the tiles and the security guard ran my card through the scanner and admitted me to the elevator. The fourth-floor hall rang with my footsteps—eerie, hollow like my innards: I was short-tempered with hunger.

"Where do you buy those suits, Charlie," Myerson greeted me, "a tent shop?"

I hate him too.

I sat down. "It's late, you're rude and I'm hungry. Can we get down to it without half an hour of the usual sparring?"

"I guess we'd better."

I was astonished. "It's serious then."

"Desperate, actually. You've been following the Quito hijack?"

"Just the headlines."

"We're in a bind."

Myerson's smile displays a keyboard of teeth reminiscent of an alligator. He rarely employs it to indicate amusement; he uses it mainly when he is anticipating the acute discomfort of someone other than himself.

For a while he smiled without speaking. Then, after he felt he'd struck terror deep into my heart, he resumed.

"The hijackers have nearly one hundred hostages, a Boeing 727 and a variety of explosives and small arms. They have a number of ransom demands as well. They've communicated the demands to the world via the plane's radio equipment."

"Does anybody know where they are yet?"

"Sure. We've known their location from the beginning. Radio triangulation, radar, so forth. It's a fiield the Ecuadorians built a few years ago to give their air force a base against the Tuperamo guerrillas. It's been in disuse since March of last year but the runway was sufficient for the 727, which is a relatively short-roll aircraft. They couldn't have done it with a jumbo. But they seem to know what they're doing; undoubtedly they took all these factors into account. We're not dealing with idiots."

"Access by road?"

"Forget it, Charlie. It's not an Entebbe situation. We can't go in after them. Our hands are tied."

"Why?"

"International politics. Organization of American States etcetera. Just take my word for it."

"Then what's the scam?"

"The hijackers have demanded the release of seventeen so-called political prisoners who are incarcerated in various

countries on charges of terrorism, murder, espionage, so forth. What the liberation people think of as victims of political persecution. Actually most of them are vermin, guilty of the vilest crimes."

"Plus they're doubtless asking for a few million dollars and a free ride to Libya or Uganda."

"Yes, of course. Disregard all that, Charlie. The problem is something altogether different."

"Then why bore me with inessentials?"

"Bear with me. Twelve of the seventeen so-called political prisoners are Ché guerrillas who're incarcerated in various South American jails. Four in Ecuador, seven in Bolivia, one in Venezuela. Four more are in prison in Mexico."

"That adds up to sixteen. Where's the seventeenth?"

"Here. Leavenworth."

"Who is he?"

"Emil Stossel." And he grinned at me. Because I was the one who'd put Stossel in prison.

I didn't give him the satisfaction of rising to the bait; I merely said, "So?"

"So the Latin Americans have elected to accede to the terrorists' demands temporarily, figuring to nail them after the hostages have been freed. The plane has several high-ranking Latin American dignitaries on board. The OAS doesn't want to risk their lives any more than it has to."

I snorted. "They're already at risk."

"It's not for us to decide. The various governments have agreed to turn the sixteen guerrillas loose and give them safe passage to Havana. They're asking us to cooperate by handing Stossel over to the East Germans in Berlin."

"Why not Havana? It's closer."

"He's not Cuban. The Cubans would have little reason to grant him asylum—he'd be an embarrassment to them. He's German. Anyhow that's the demand and we've got to

live with it." Myerson glanced at the clock above the official photograph of the President. "In two hours we're putting him on a plane in Kansas. It will connect with an international flight at Dulles. He'll be in Berlin tomorrow night."

Then Myerson made a face. "It's asinine, I agree—you don't make deals with terrorists. These governments are fools. But we've got no choice. If we held out—refused to release Stossel—you can imagine the black eye we'd get if the hijackers started murdering hostages one at a time."

"All right," I said. "We've got our national tail in a crack. We have to turn him over to the DDR. I don't like turning mass murderers loose any more than you do but I still don't see what it's got to do with me."

He smiled again. I fought the impulse to flinch. "How's your broken-field running these days, fat man?"

I saw it coming. His smugness made me gag. He said, "You're going to intercept the pass, Charlie."

"Before or after he crosses the wall?"

"After."

"Lovely."

"We can't recapture him until after the hijack has been dealt with, can we. The hostages have to be turned loose before we can lay a finger on Stossel."

"In other words you want to deliver him to the East Germans and wait for the hijack to end and then afterward you expect me to get him back and put him back in Leavenworth to finish out his sentence."

"Right. After all, we can't have the world think we've gone soft, can we. We've got to prove they can't get away with it. Carry a big stick and all that."

"We could kill him," I said. "It's a lot easier to assassinate him in East Germany than it is to bring him out alive. No, never mind, don't say it. I know. We won't be stampeded

into committing public murder, especially on hostile soil. We have to bring him back alive because that's the best way to rub their noses in it."

"You have the picture, I'm happy to see."

I said, "It's impossible."

"Of course it is. They'll be expecting it. They'll leave no openings at all." He smiled slowly, deliciously. "Charlie, it's the kind of job you do best. You get bored with anything less."

"Ever since that caper with von Schnee I've been *persona non grata* in the Eastern sector. If they catch me on their side of the wall they'll lock me up for a hundred and fifty years. In thumbscrews. On German peasant food."

"Yes. I know. Adds a bit of spice to the challenge, doesn't it." And he smiled more broadly than ever.

* * *

Emil Stossel had cut his eyeteeth on Abwehr duplicity and he'd run a string of successful agents in the United States for the Eastern bloc intelligence services. The FBI hadn't been able to crack him and I'd been assigned to him about twelve years ago before we all got dumped into a fishbowl where we were no longer permitted to do that sort of thing domestically. It took time and patience but in the end we were ready to go in after him. His HQ was in Arlington not far from the Pentagon—Stossel had nerve and a sense of humor.

The actual bust was an FBI caper and as usual they muffed it. Stossel got away long enough to barricade himself in the nearby high school and before it was finished he'd killed several of his teen-age hostages. It had led to five life sentences, to be served consecutively, and even the Red diplomats had been wise enough not to put up more than token objection. But Stossel remained one of the

cleverist operatives the DDR had ever fielded. He was an embarrassment to them but they wouldn't mind having him back; he could be of use to them: They'd use his skills. He'd soon be directing clandestine operations again for them, I had no doubt of it; they'd keep him out of sight but they'd use him and we'd feel the results before long. It was another excellent reason to get him back.

Stossel's callous annihilation of the teen-age innocents in the high school naturally had endeared him to the verminous terrorists who infested the world of "liberation" movements. He was a hero to them; it didn't matter whether he was a professional or an asinine leftist incompetent—it was his brutality that made him a hero to the Quito hijackers. At the same time the East Germans, to whom Stossel was undoubtedly a public embarrassment, could not disown him now without offending their Marxist disciples in Latin America. They would have no choice but to grant him asylum; and once having done so, as I say, they would use him.

Of course that wouldn't do.

* * *

I MANAGED TO ARRIVE at Tempelhof ahead of him by arranging for his plane to undergo a refueling delay at Gatwick. It gave me time for a brief meeting at Tempelhof with an American Air Force colonel (Intelligence) who was dubious about cooperating until I put him on a scrambler line to Washington. The colonel grunted into the phone, stiffened to attention, said, "Yes, sir," and cradled the receiver with awe. Then he gave me the item I'd requested.

I'd had time on the plane, between meals and extra meals, to work out something approximating a plan. It is what distinguishes me from the computer lads: flexibility, preparedness, the ability to improvise quickly and precisely —ingenuity guided by experience. It's why I am the best.

The plan had to account for a number of factors such as, for example, the undesirability of my having to set foot physically on their side of the Wall. Much better if I could pull off the caper with long strings, manipulating my puppets from afar. Also there was the fact that Stossel undoubtedly would have several days' grace inside East Germany before the hijackers released their hostages and the Quito caper came to its conclusion; it would give Stossel time to bury himself far beyond my reach and I had to counter that effect with preparations designed to bring him to the surface at the end of the going-to-ground period.

The scheme was, I must admit, one of the cleverest of my long, devious and successful career.

* * *

I WAITED FOR Stossel in a private cubicle at the airport—somebody's office; it was well furnished, the appointments complete right down to a thoroughly stocked bar and an adjoining full bath. Through the double-paned windows was a soundproofed view of the busy runways.

Two armed plainclothes guards brought him into the room and examined my credentials carefully before they retreated to the far side of the room and left me to talk with him. We spoke in German.

I said, "You remember me."

"Yes. I remember you." He'd had twelve years in prison to think about me and there was a great deal of hate in his voice.

"I was doing my job," I said, "just as you were doing yours." I wanted to soften him up a bit and Stossel's German soul would understand the common concept of duty: he was, above all else, a co-professional. I was leaning on that.

I said, "I've got another job now. My orders are to make

sure you get across to your own country in safety. You've still got enemies here."

It made him smile a bit at the irony of it and I was pleased because it was the reaction I needed from him. I went around behind the bar. "A drink? It'll be a little while before our transportation arrives. We want the streets empty when we drive you through West Berlin."

He looked dubious. I poured myself a bourbon and stepped away from the bar. "Help yourself," I said offhandedly, and wandered toward the windows.

A Viscount was landing, puffs of smoke as the wheels touched. In the reflection of the glass I saw him make his choice. He poured himself two fingers of Polish vodka from a bottle that had a stalk of grass in it; he brought the drink around toward me and I turned to face him. "Prosit." I elevated my glass in toast, and drank. "What's it feel like to be going home?"

"It feels good. Doubly good because it must annoy you so much to watch me walk away." He made an elegant and ironic gesture with the glass and tossed it back Russian style, one gulp, and I watched his eyes close with the pleasure of it—it was the first drink of first-class home-style booze he'd had in a dozen years.

I said, "Did you ever find out what led me to you in Arlington in the first place?"

"Does it matter?"

"It was a trivial error."

"Humans make them."

"Yes. But I have the feeling you'll make the same mistake again—the same weakness will trip you up next time." I smiled. "In fact I'm sure of it."

"Would you care to bet on it, Dark?"

"Sure."

"How much, then?"

"Your freedom," I said.

He was amused. "We'll never meet again, unless it's in an East German prison—you inside, me outside."

"I'll take the bet, Stossel." I turned to watch the Viscount taxi toward the terminal. "I'd like you to memorize a telephone number. It's here in the Western sector."

"What for?"

"You may want to get in touch with me." I gave him the number: I repeated it three times and knew he wouldn't forget it—he had an excellent memory for numbers.

He laughed. "I can't conceive of——"

The phone rang, interrupting him. I went to the bar to answer it. Listened, spoke, then turned to Stossel. "The car's here."

"I'm ready."

"Then let's go."

* * *

I STOOD ON the safe side of Checkpoint Charlie with my hatbrim down and my collar up against the fine night drizzle and watched the big Opel slide through the barriers. The Wall loomed grotesquely. Stossel emerged from the car at the DDR booth and I saw him shake hands with the raincoated delegation of East German officials. They were minor functionaries, police types, Vopos in the background in their uniforms; near me stood an American TV crew with a portable camera, filming the scene for tomorrow's news. It was all bleak and foreign-intriguish; I hoped they were using black-and-white. The East Germans bundled Stossel into a dark Zis limousine and when it disappeared I walked back to Davidson's Volkswagen and squeezed into the passenger seat.

Davidson put it in gear. "Where to?"

"Bristol Kempinski."

On the way to the hotel he tried to pump me about my plans. Davidson is the chief of the Berlin station; Myerson hadn't had any choice but to brief him on my mission because there'd have been a flap otherwise—jurisdictional jealousies are rampant in the Company and never more ferocious than on the ultra-active stations like Berlin. Myerson had been forced to reveal my mission to Davidson, if only to reassure him that I wasn't horning in on any of his own works-in-progress. But he knew none of the tactical details and he was seething to find out. I had to fend him off without putting his nose too far out of joint. I didn't enjoy it; I'm no good at it—I'm an accomplished liar but that sort of diplomatic deceit is not quite lying and I lack the patience for it. In any case I was tired from the long flight and from the adrenalin that had shot through me during the crucial stage of the set up. If it had gone wrong at that moment. . . . But it hadn't and I was still on course and running.

In the hotel room I ordered a huge dinner sent up. Davidson had eaten earlier but he stubbornly hovered, still prying for information, watching with amazement and ill-concealed disgust while I demolished the enormous meal. He shared the wine with me; it was a fair Moselle.

"What did you want from that Air Force colonel who met you at the airport?"

"Look, Arthur, I don't mean to be an obstructionist, I know it's your bailiwick but the operation's classiffied on a need-to-know basis and if you can get authorization from Langley then I'll be happy to fill you in on the tedious details. Right now my hands are tied. I ask you to understand and sympathize."

Finally he went away after making it clear he intended to file a complaint. I was relieved to see his back. I tumbled into the luxurious bed and was instantly asleep.

There wasn't much I could do but wait for the phone. I had to spend the time in the hotel room: Some discreet machinations had taken place, through Davidson's offices, to get the private phone line installed on short notice. I might have been in prison for all the freedom of movement I had; it made me think of Stossel with irony. At least I had a comfortable cell; it was why I'd picked the Bristol Kempinski—Old World elegance, hot and cold running everything.

I caught up on reading, watched some soporifically slow German television programs, enticed Davidson and some others into a sixteen-hour poker game that cost them, collectively, some four hundred dollars, and growled at the phone frequently in an effort to will it to ring.

* * *

THE TELEVISION brought me news of the hijack story in South America. All their other demands having been met, the hijackers forced the aircrew to fly them to Buenos Aires on the first leg of a journey to North Africa. While the plane was refueling at Buenos Aires a gang of Argentinean commandoes got aboard in maintenance coveralls, isolated the hijackers neatly and brought the caper to its end; passengers and crew were released unharmed; two hijackers dead, three wounded and captured. Case closed.

About that time I had a blistering phone call from Myerson. "Are you still sitting on your four-acre duff? You're free to go in and get him now."

"I've still got jet lag. Maybe tomorrow."

"Damn you—"

"You want it done properly, don't you?"

"The pressure's on me."

"Live with it." I rang off, amused and pleased. I hadn't revealed my plan to him. Let him stew. I summoned a whopping great lunch from room service.

Between me and Myerson lies the unspoken understanding that he has half his hopes pinned on my accomplishing the objective and the other half pinned on my falling flat on my big face. I'm uncertain which of the prospects gives him the greater anticipatory thrill.

By the fourth day Myerson's phone calls were nearly apoplectic and I was rested, replete and recumbent. Today would be the most likely day for things to break according to the science of the situation.

Myerson was issuing ultimata. "I know you're scared of going over into the Eastern zone. Well, it's just too bad, Charlie. If you're still in that hotel at midnight I'm throwing you to the wolves."

I rang it off without replying. I was able to contain my anxiety—if he threw me to the wolves prematurely and then my plan came off successfully, it would make him doubly the fool and he wasn't going to risk that. The threat was empty for the moment. But he might go around the bend at some point, throw self-preservation to the winds in his rage against me. I couldn't do much about that except hope it held off long enough to let things sort themselves out.

The real anxiety had to do with Stossel. Suppose he couldn't get to a phone: If they were still holding him in Debriefing he might not have access to an outside phone. But they'd had him nearly a week now; surely they'd have administered pentathol by now and learned he was still loyal to them.

I knew one thing. Myerson or no Myerson, I wasn't going over that Wall. No one-way trips for old Charlie Dark. However it topped out, this was going to remain a remote-control job. I'd already pulled the strings and there was nothing left now except to wait and hope the puppet danced.

Davidson kept dropping in when he had nothing better to do. He came at me from oblique angles and doubtless thought himself clever. That afternoon he was pumping me slyly about Stossel. "How did you nail him in the first place?"

"The job was to find him—we didn't know where he was holed up. He ran his network through a Byzantine series of cutouts and blind drops. Nobody'd ever been able to trace him back to his lair. We knew he was in the Arlington-Alexandria area but that was the sum of our knowledge. I had to ask myself how somebody might find Charlie Dark if *he* were hiding out, and I answered myself that all you'd have to do would be to find the best Italian food in town and wait for Charlie Dark to show up there. It worked the same way with Stossel. Everybody has preferences, colas or a brand of cigarettes or whatever. It takes a lot of manpower to work that kind of lead but we had no choice. We had the dossier on him, we knew his quirks. He's half Polish, you know. Always had a taste for the best Polish vodka—the kind that's sold with a stalk of buffalo grass in the bottle."

"I've tried that stuff. Once. Tastes foul."

"Not to Stossel," I said. "Or a lot of other people. Most fair-sized liquor stores in the States carry the stuff. It took manpower and work—that was FBI work, of course. They staked out dozens of stores and in the end it led us to Stossel. He was tripped up by his preference for Polish vodka. I told him it was a weakness that would betray him again."

"Has it?"

I was about to answer him when the phone rang. It galvanized me.

"Herr Dark?"

"Speaking."

"My people—the doctors—they tell me there is no antidote."

"They're wrong," I told him. "We've developed one."

"I see." There was no emotion in Stossel's voice.

"West side, Checkpoint Charlie," I said, "any time you're ready. We'll be waiting. Come alone, of course." I smiled when I cradled the phone.

The smile wasn't for Stossel; it was for Myerson.

Stossel came out at eleven forty that night. It was twenty minutes short of the deadline Myerson had given me. There was a satisfying symmetry in that.

Davidson put the handcuffs on him. Stossel was stoic. "How long do I have?"

"You'll be all right now." We rode toward the airport with Stossel squeezed between us in the Opel's back seat. It was safe to tell him now. I said, "Actually it's a benign poison. It has all the attributes and early symptoms of Luminous Poisoning but in fact it's the reverse."

"Our doctors told me it was incurable. I had terrible cramps."

"I didn't give you the poison, Stossel. I gave you the antidote. Like a serum. It contains similar properties."

"You bluffed me." He brooded upon his handcuffs. "Of course it was in the vodka."

"Where else? I told you the weakness would trip you up."

When I boarded the plane with Stossel I was savagely happy anticipating Myerson's rage. On the ten-hour flight I ate five dinners.

* * *

Trust Charlie

I SAID, "Either cover up that mirror or let's meet somewhere else."

Myerson showed me his surprise, then pained impatience. "For Pete's sake, Charlie. It's an ordinary hotel room. Booked at random."

"I'm still alive after all these years because I'm a practicing paranoid, all right?"

"For Pete's sake."

But we went down to the lobby and outside into the African sun, both of us in shirtsleeves against the heat. Myerson sneered at me.

We walked past a rank of ten-year-old taxis. At the open stalls vendors were selling passion fruit and mangoes and coconuts and what-have-you, all of it clustered with flies. We crossed the central square, dodging a spotty traffic of cars and trucks and sagging overcrowded buses; an armored personnel carrier growled past carrying a dozen soldiers who held automatic rifles in casual positions. Two of the soldiers were laughing. Myerson glanced up at the statue of the country's president and his sneer seemed to droop. Pedestrians moved lazily through the noxious smoke thrown around by the ill-maintained vehicles: it will be quite a while yet before Africa becomes pollution-conscious.

Myerson led me through a narrow passage and we

emerged at the corner of a stone customhouse that one of the colonial powers must have built long ago. It might have been the Germans or the Portuguese or the English—several nations had claimed the colony at various times; the building itself was too drab to identify its architects. Its walls were overgrown with bougainvillea.

We found a wooden bench under a palm tree. The earth sloped down toward a stone retaining wall that held back the sea—we had a good view across the crescent of the harbor. Coastal freighters were anchored out, lighters plying to and from them; there was a fair crowd of Indian Ocean junks, square sails furled. The saltwater smell was rich, pungent with raw sewage. A few people ambled past us (no one moved quickly in that heat), most of them Africans, some in tribal gear and others in burnouses and Western clothes; the occasional Asian, the even rarer European in flowered prints or khakis or department-store poplin safari outfits.

Myerson favored me with a sour dry gaze. "Will this suit you?" We seated ourselves.

Then he smiled, putting as many teeth into it as an alligator, and I felt alarm.

"I see you've enjoyed your vacation. You've put on at least forty pounds—anything less wouldn't be noticeable on you. I really can't afford to let you off the leash this way. You'll eat yourself to death."

I was overweight to be sure, and overage for that matter, but no more so than I'd been last time he'd seen me ten days earlier in Virginia. It was just his way of needling me.

I said, "It was a good holiday until you cut it short. I've still got eleven days coming to me."

"Pull this off and you can have twelve."

"That tough, is it?"

"Tough? No, I wouldn't say it was tough. I'd say it's impossible."

"That's the kind I like." I grinned at him. "Anyway it's desperate enough to get you out from behind your desk for the first time in I don't remember how long."

He squirmed. "We're both on the line this time, I'm afraid."

"In other words you've dropped the ball and if I don't pick it up you'll be thrown out of the game. I've expected this, you know. Sooner or later you were destined to foul up. Have you ever considered washing cars for a living? You may just have enough talent for it."

"Let's save the catcalls for another time, Charlie. This is serious. It could mean my job—and you know what that means to you."

I did. If he goes I go. They want me out. If it weren't for Myerson I wouldn't have a job. I'd probably have to turn to crime to keep the juices flowing.

He said, "The impossibility is named August Brent. British parents but he was born here and he's a citizen, one of the few. Under the old colonial regime he had a key job in the colonial exchequer. Educated at the London School of Economics. Since independence he's been something like second-secretary to the Minister of Finance, some title like that—he's a white man, after all, they couldn't very well give him a cabinet post, but the fact is he's been running the ministry. Until the terror."

"And then?"

"When they started terrorizing the Asians and whites a few weeks ago he began to think about getting out. His mistake was in talking to too many people. The government got wind of his intentions to depart."

Myerson looked out across the harbor. A graceful ketch was leaving under canvas; there was a racket of gulls.

Soldiers in fatigues—armed—walked here and there by twos, quietly menacing.

Myerson said, "He was packed and ready to leave. He went out to buy something—airsick pills, something innocuous like that. The soldiers hit his house while he was out. On his way home he spotted them and had time to get out of sight but he knew the alarm was out, of course, and he made for the British Embassy but it was surrounded by troops. He backtracked and ended up on our doorstep. This was a week ago."

"The American Embassy?"

"Right. He demanded asylum. Threw himself on the Ambassador's mercy."

"Then they called you in."

Myerson sighed. "I tried to bring him out, Charlie. I didn't want to disturb your vacation."

"Sure."

"I tried. I botched it. Is that blunt enough to satisfy you?"

"I'm tempted to gloat, sure enough."

"He's still there. In the Embassy. An acute embarrassment to everybody—British, Africans, Americans. I can't guess which of them hate him the most."

"Is he worth anything?"

"On the open market? Nothing. The inside secrets of the finances of a two-bit third world nationlet—who cares? No. Two cents would buy him."

"Well, I guess the Ambassador must be a human being. Didn't want to throw the poor wretch to the wolves and all that. And anyhow we'd lose face if we reneged on the asylum. That it?"

"Acute embarrassment, yes. By protecting him we offend our African hosts; but by turning him loose we'd be welshing on a commitment. The British, of course, are laughing their heads off."

"Why do the Africans want him?"

"He betrayed them and he's getting away with it. They can't have that. They need to prove it's dangerous for anyone to cross them. Charlie, listen—all else aside, there's no doubt in my mind but that if we gave him back to the Africans he'd last forty-eight hours at the outside. An accident, of course."

The ketch dwindled toward the horizon, hoisting more sail. Myerson said, "It's a dreary mess. The man's of no value, not even to himself. If we do get him out, what of it? At best he'll find some petty civil service job in England. At worst he'll end up sleeping off cheap wine in alleys. Nobody cares about him—nobody needs to. He's a drip. But we have to try, don't we. We have to give him a chance."

"I suppose. How did you try to get him out?"

"Laundry van. They searched it with bayonets. Pricked him pretty good. In the arm. We managed to hustle him back inside. A couple of shots were fired—no injuries but the Africans were pretty sore about it. They've quadrupled the guard around the Embassy. It's not rifles now, it's machine guns and riot troops. They're searching every vehicle and pedestrian that comes out of the building. You couldn't get a mosquito out of there now. I confess it's my fault—the laundry truck was my idea. We had a private jet waiting. It's only a five minute flight across the border."

"Is the plane still available?"

"Yes."

"Then all we have to do is get him to the plane and he's home free."

"Sure. But if we try again and fail we'll be laughing-stocks from Johannesburg to Cairo. They'll tie a can to my tail. Yours too."

"Why not just leave him in there until the Africans find something else to occupy them?"

"No good. Every minute he remains in that building he's a thorn in both sides. He could become the flashpoint of a nasty international incident."

"So we have to get him out safely and soon."

"Soonest."

I stood up. "Let's have a look at the Embassy."

* * *

IT HAD BEEN Government House in colonial times, built in Cecil Rhodes' time—Empire, the raj, so forth. It had been built to impress. Now it had the slightly gone-to-seed look that creeps up on buildings in the tropics—a symptom of dampness and heat and termites: the lines seemed to sag and things had gone grey in patches and parts of it appeared to be crumbling; possibly it was a trick of the afternoon shadows.

It stood behind a high wrought-iron fence. There were palm trees, flame trees, acacias. Six Doric columns supported the high porte-cochere. American flag. Four marines on duty at the gate.

The African troops slouched at intervals outside the fence. I counted twenty-eight men, a half-track APC, two jeeps and a radio truck; probably there were more behind the Embassy. I said drily to Myerson, "I don't see anything those four marines shouldn't be able to handle."

"These are hardly the days of the Panay in the Yangtze. But I'll admit there was something to gunboat diplomacy. Tell me, Charlie, did you actually serve under Teddy Roosevelt?"

"Why, I did my boot training under George Armstrong Custer."

"That's what I thought."

A dusty bus drew up and decanted a camera-bedecked crowd of tourists, most of them Japanese, a few

Americans and Europeans. The tour guide was a little man in sunglasses with a grey beard that looked as if rats had slept in it. From the color of his nose he was a drinking man. He said in a piping German-accented voice, "This way please, follow me," and led the tourists past the watchful marines onto the Embassy grounds.

I was astonished. "They just come and go like that?"

"Nobody wants to stop them. The country needs tourists desperately and this building's a landmark. Bismarck and Queen Elizabeth slept in it. Not, I assume, on the same night. Actually she was Princess Elizabeth then. They—" he was talking about the tourists now "—only see the public rooms on the ground floor, of course. No access to working Embassy areas. You need a pass, ID and an armed escort to get past the doors. I think the tour groups visit twice a day. I heard part of the old German's spiel this morning. He's pretty good—an old Africa hand, used to hunt rhino with Selous when he was a boy."

We walked inside and had to clear ourselves with the marine guard. The soldiers across the street watched balefully. We went through the main doors and passed through a series of interior checkpoints and finally entered a comfortable but not very large office whose occupant, like the government-green paint, was drab and in need of a touchup. I knew him vaguely from past acquaintance: Oscar Claiborne, twenty-five-year man, passed over numerous times for promotion, assigned to one backwater job after another. Officially he was some variety of trade attaché; actually he was the Agency's stringer. One look at him and you yawned.

"Oscar, you know Charlie Dark."

We shook hands. Myerson said to Oscar, "Sit-rep?" He deludes himself into thinking his clumsy use of jargon phrases will ingratiate him with the men in the field.

Sit-rep, some years ago, used to be Agency lingo for Situation Report.

Oscar said, "No change. He's in his room lying on his side, nursing the bad arm. Taking things calmly enough, I'll give him that."

I said, "How bad is the bayonet injury?"

"Superficial. It's healing nicely." Oscar beamed at me. "Hey, old buddy, how're they hangin'?"

"I'd like to talk to Brent," I said to Myerson.

* * *

August Brent was undersized and sharp-featured and had a cockney look. A monk's fringe of limp sandy hair ran around the back of his bald cranium. His speech was rapid and clipped, the English of a man born in Africa. I liked him well enough; he was too ingratiating but I attributed that to his obvious fear. I was glad to see he wasn't sweating unduly. That symptom is almost impossible to disguise.

We talked for a bit—I wanted him to warm to me. I needed his trust because he'd only go through with it if he believed I could be depended on. The scheme had occurred to me immediately and it was considerably less complex than many I'd essayed.

Oscar Claiborne interrupted us and took me outside into the hall. "Bad news, I'm afraid. They've issued a fugitive execution warrant on him."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning he can be shot on sight. Legally."

"And they call this a freedom-loving democracy." I went in search of Myerson.

* * *

In the Embassy cafeteria Myerson brooded at me, watching with a sneer while I put away a big meal. All he had was

coffee and all he said was, "I'll hand them one thing—it's fantastic coffee."

"They grow it here, dunce. You ever eat a coffee bean fresh off the bush before the packagers have got their hands on it? Sweet and delicious—like a chocolate drop. You used to be an actor, didn't you?"

He was startled and then suspicious. "You've been prowling in the files."

"No. Actually I saw you on stage once. Nineteen thirty-eight, I think. *The Cat and the Canary*. Summer stock—Woods Hole, wasn't it? You weren't too awful."

"My God. I was seventeen years old. How in hell did you—?"

"Do you still remember anything about theatrics?"

"I was a kid. It was forty years ago."

"But you may remember make-up techniques."

"Maybe. A little. I haven't thought about it. You figure to disguise yourself, Charlie?" His lips curled into a disbelieving grin and he surveyed my girth ostentatiously. "Sure, a little pancake here and there and you could pass for Clint Eastwood." He broke into rude laughter.

I gave him time to subside and said calmly, "We'll move him out tomorrow afternoon. Have the plane ready to go any time after two o'clock."

"How?"

"The guided tour."

"You're nuts. They search every one of those tourists as they leave the Embassy."

"I know. I want you to send people out to the hotels. Find every tourist in town who bears any resemblance, no matter how superficial, to our man. Small thin guys. Ask them to join the bus tour tomorrow afternoon. Give them free tickets, invite them to the Ambassador's party, appeal to their patriotism—do anything, just get 'em on that bus. I want six or eight small thin white men in the group."

"It won't work, Charlie. They *know* him."

"It's a black country." I smiled at him. "All whites look alike in the sunshine. Tell 'em to wear hats."

"They've been rolling up sleeves looking for that bayonet scab."

"Trust me."

"Listen, if he gets killed while he's supposed to be under our protection. . ."

"Just get me the tourists," I said. "And trust me."

I went back to August Brent's room to bolster his spirits with a pep talk. At first he was alarmed when I described the scheme. It took a while to reassure him. "It's the Purloined Letter technique. The one thing to remember is not to be furtive. If you're bold enough they'll never spot you. Just don't act scared, all right?"

Myerson and I took turns coaching him most of the evening. In the morning I booked a ticket on the bus tour and rode the entire route, learning more than I needed to know about that steamy corner of the world, and by one o'clock I was back in the cafeteria eating lunch. The beef in Africa is terrible but the fruits are delicious.

I had made a deal with the man whose place Brent would take on the bus tour. It was costing us a sizable chunk of the division's budget but Myerson didn't balk; he had more than money on the line. When the German guide led the afternoon group into the Embassy's front hall we were ready. I spirited our volunteer away from the group into a private office; Brent exchanged clothes and documents with him; careful application of make-up and false hair and we were set to go. I hardly recognized Brent myself—wouldn't have, if I hadn't known who he was. We gave him a few words of cheer and sent him out to join the tour.

Myerson came outside with me to watch. Sweat stood out on his forehead. The tour filed out toward the bus and

Myerson tried to suppress a groan. Out of the side of his mouth he said, "It hasn't got a prayer, you damn fool."

The tourists filed past the Marines and then the African soldiers moved in, intercepting the queue. Myerson's handkerchief came out and while he scrubbed his face I said, "Look at something else, damn it. Don't look so interested."

The soldiers were examining the first tourist, removing his hat and then tugging at his hair. They tested his mustache and examined his face with belligerent suspicion. He was one of the half-dozen tourists Myerson had recruited—roughly Brent's size and build—and the soldiers' eyes were narrowed with cruel determination. They knew what it would mean to them if they should let Brent slip through.

They rolled up both the man's sleeves—apparently they weren't sure whether Brent had been wounded in the right arm or the left.

They passed the man through, finally, and two women and a Japanese, and then they went to work on the next slight-built white tourist. Myerson's breathing rasped against the damp silence. At the bus the tour guide helped the two women up the steps and stood aside by the bus door, bored, cleaning his fingernails, smiling with absent politeness as each tourist climbed aboard. The soldiers grudgingly let the second white through, glanced cursorily at an Oriental woman and two adolescents, and zeroed in on our third volunteer tourist.

Myerson said under his breath, "I never should have let you talk me into this. We're not going to make it. We'll never get away with it, Charlie. You and I will spend the rest of our miserable careers in a basement decoding signals from Liechtenstein. They're bound to catch him—they can't help but spot him..."

"Trust me, you bastard."

Nine tourists to go; then eight. . .

* * *

WHEN WE WERE airborne I unbuckled my seat belt and went jauntily past Myerson's sour face to where August Brent sat peeling the phony hair off his cheeks. He beamed up at me and then winced when the spirit gum tugged at his flesh. I said, "Any plans?"

"I've got a job waiting. Writing opinion columns for a chain of newspapers on African affairs."

"Sounds good." Better than I'd expected for him. I went forward and loomed over Myerson, knowing it made him uncomfortable to think that one lurch of the plane could capsize my bulk into his lap. I said, "You need to remind yourself of this lesson from time to time. It always pays to trust old Charlie Dark."

"They *had* to tumble to it. I still don't understand it."

"All those look-alike tourists, all Brent's size—they had to assume he was one of those. I knew it wouldn't occur to them to take a close look at a man they'd seen twice a day for years. Magician's trick, you know—you make a quick move that draws the eye to your right hand while the left hand quietly pulls the switch in plain view but the audience never sees it. Nobody was going to look twice at that grey-bearded German tour guide with the shiny red nose. But put chinwhiskers on Brent and paint his nose. . ." I showed him my grin and pretended to lurch toward him. Myerson's flinch elicited my laugh. I tweaked his nose and waddled toward the galley to see what they had to eat.

* * *

Charlie's Vigorish

WHEN I SAW the phone's red message-light flashing I had a premonition—it had to be Myerson; no one else knew I was in New York.

I rang the switchboard. "This is Mr. Dark in Fifteen Eleven. There's a message light." I tossed the folded Playbill on the coffee table and jerked my tie loose.

"Yes, sir, here it is. Please call Mr. Myerson. He didn't leave a number, sir."

"That's all right, I know the number. Thanks." I cradled it before I emitted an oath. Childishly I found ways to postpone making the call: stripped, showered, counted my travelers' cheques, switched the television on and went around the dial and switched it off. Finally I made a face and rang through to Myerson's home number in Georgetown.

"Charlie?"

I said, "I'm on vacation. I didn't want to hear from you."

"How was the play?"

"Dreary. Why don't they write plays with real people in them any more?"

"Charlie, those *are* real people. You're out of touch."

"Thank God. What do you want?" I made it cold and rude.

"Oh I just thought you might be lonesome for my voice."

"Has Hell frozen over?" Then I said, "If it's an assignment you can shove it somewhere with a hot poker. You've already postponed my vacation once this year."

"Actually I've been thinking of posting you to Rekjavik to spend a few years monitoring Russian submarine signals. You're designed for the climate—all that blubber insulation."

"The difference between us," I told him, "my blubber's not between my ears. You called me in the middle of my vacation to throw stale insults at me?"

"Actually I wish there were some terrible crisis because it might give me the pleasure of shipping you off to some God-forsaken desert to get stung by sandflies and machine-gun slugs, but the fact is I'm only passing on a message out of the kindness of my heart. Your sister-in-law telephoned the Company this afternoon. Something's happened to your brother. It sounded a bit urgent. I said I'd pass the word to you."

"All right." Then I added grudgingly, "Thanks." And rang off. I looked at the time—short of midnight—and because of the time zones it was only about nine in Arizona so I looked up the number and rang it.

When Margaret came on the line her voice seemed calm enough. "Hi, Charlie, thanks for calling."

"What's happened?"

"Eddie's hurt."

"How bad?"

She cleared her throat. "He was on the critical list earlier but they've taken him off. Demoted him to 'serious.'" Her abrupt laugh was off-key. I suspected they might have doped her with something to calm her down. She said, "He was beaten. Deliberately. Nearly beaten to death."

* * *

EDDIE ISN'T as fat as I am, nor as old—by six years—but

he's a big man with chins and a belly; his hair, unlike mine, is still cordovan but then unlike me he's going bald on top. The last time I'd seen him—a quick airport drink four years earlier, between planes—the capillaries in his nose had given evidence of his increasing devotion to Kentucky bourbon. His predeliction was for booze while mine was for cuisine.

This time his nose and part of his skull were concealed under neat white bandages and both his legs were cast in plaster. He was breathing in short bursts because they'd taped him tight to protect the cracked ribs. They were still running tests to find out if any of his internal organs had been injured.

He looked a sorry sight on the hospital bed and did not attempt to smile. Margaret, plump and worried, hovered by him. He seemed more angry than pained—his eyes flashed bitterly. His voice was stuffed up as if he had a terrible head cold; that was the result of the broken nose.

He said, "Been a long time since I asked you for anything."

"Ask away."

"I want you to get the son of a bitch."

"What's wrong with the cops?"

"They can't touch him."

The hospital room had a nice view of the Santa Catalina mountains and the desert foothills. There was only one chair; Margaret seemed disinclined to use it so I sat down. "Who did it?"

"This? Three guys. Border toughs. The cops have them—they were stupid enough to let me see their car when they cornered me and I had the presence of mind to get the license number. They don't matter—they've been arraigned and I'll testify. They're just buttons."

"Hired?"

"Ten-cent toughs. You can rent them by the hour. Somebody briefed them on my habits—they knew I'd stop

at Paco's bar on my way home. They were waiting for me in the parking lot."

Margaret said, "They're in custody but of course they claim they don't know who hired them."

"They probably don't," Eddie said. "A voice on the phone, a few hundred dollars in cash in an unmarked envelope. That's the way it's usually done. It makes certain the cops can't trace back to the guy who hired them."

I said, "The Mob."

"Sure."

"You know who hired them."

"Sure. I know." Then his lids drooped.

Margaret said, "You're a sort of a cop, Charlie. We thought you might tell us how to handle it."

"I'm not a cop." Around the fourth floor in Langley call us loose stringers, meaning we're nomadic troubleshooters—no fixed territorial station—but I'm by no means any kind of cop. Margaret and Eddie didn't know my actual occupation: they knew I worked for the government and they assumed I was with the CIA but for all they knew I was a message clerk. I found their faith touching but misplaced.

Eddie said, "If you were a cop you couldn't do me any good. I don't want somebody to read the bastard his rights—I want somebody to nail him."

"I'm not a hit man, Eddie. I don't kill people."

"I don't want him killed. He didn't kill me, did he?" His eyes glittered. "I just want him to hurt."

"Who is he?"

"Calls himself Clay Foran. I doubt it's the name he was born with. What he does, he lends money to people who can't get it from the bank."

"Loan shark."

"Yeah."

"Eddie, Eddie." I shook my head at him. "You haven't grown up at all."

"Okay, I can't move, I'm a captive audience if you want to deliver yourself of a lecture."

"No lecture. What happened?"

"An apartment house construction deal. I ran into cost overrides—rising prices on building materials. I had to come up with another fifty thousand or forfeit to the bank that holds the construction mortgage. I figured to clear a four hundred K profit if I could complete the job and sell it for the capital gain, and of course there's a whopping tax-shelter deduction in that kind of construction. So I figured I could afford to borrow the fifty thousand even if the interest rate was exorbitant."

"Vigorish."

"Yeah. Usury. Whatever. Trouble is, I was already stretched past my limit with the banks and the building-and-loans. Hell, I was kiting checks over the weekend as it was, but I was in too deep to quit. I had to get the building completed so I could sell it. Otherwise the bank was set to foreclose. So I asked around. Sooner or later somebody steered me to Clay Foran."

"And?"

"Very respectable businessman, Foran. Calls himself an investment broker. Of course he's connected with the Mob. Arizona's crawling with them nowadays, they all moved out here. For their health," he added drily.

"How big is he?"

"Compared to what?"

"Nickle and dime, or million-dollar loans?"

"In the middle. It didn't pinch his coffers to come up with my fifty K but he did it after I offered him a little extra vigorish on the side. Mostly I imagine he spreads it around, five thousand here, ten thousand there—you know,

minimize the risks. But hell, those guys get five percent a week; he's rich enough."

"Two hundred and sixty percent annual interest?"

"You got it. I know, I know. But I was in a bind, Charlie, I had nowhere else to turn. And I figured to sell the project inside of a month. I figured I could handle it—ten grand interest."

"But?"

"You see what they did to me. Obviously I came up short. It wasn't my fault. The building next door caught fire. My building didn't burn but the heat set off the automatic sprinkler system and it ruined the place. Seventy thousand damage—carpets, paint, doors, the works. The insurance barely covered half of it, and the damage set me back more than two months behind schedule. I had to bail out, Charlie. What choice did I have? My construction company went into Chapter Eleven. It's not my first bankruptcy and maybe it won't be my last—you know me—but I'd have paid them back. I tried to keep up the payments. I was a few days late a couple of times and we got threatening phone calls, so forth—you know how it goes. Then it wasn't a week any more, it was three weeks, and you see what happened. They took out their vigorish in blood. I guess they wrote me off as a bad debt but they figure to leave me crippled as an example to other borrowers who think about welshing. Nothing personal, you understand." His lip curled.

Margaret took his hand between hers. Margaret was always there to cushion Eddie's falls: good-humored, fun-loving, careless of her appearance. She had endured all his failures; she loved the real Eddie, not the man he ought to have been. If I ever find a woman like Margaret I'll have won the grand prize.

Eddie said, "I know the ropes, I had my eyes open, I'm not naive. But they've crippled me for life, Charlie. Both

kneecaps. They'll be replaced with plastic prosthetics but I'll spend the rest of my life walking like a marionette. Two canes. I figure they hit me too hard, you know. I almost died. Maybe I still will. We don't know what's bleeding inside me."

"You knew those guys played rough, Eddie. You knew it going in."

It sounded lame and self-righteous even as I said it. Eddie's eyes only smiled at me. He knew I'd pick up the baton.

* * *

MY LONG-DISTANCE CALL to Myerson was lengthy and exasperating. He kept coming back to the same sore point. "You're asking me to commit Agency facilities to your private vengeance scheme. I can't do it."

"The Company's got no use for it. Never will have. The press blew its cover in 1969 and it's been sitting there ever since, gathering dust. They're carrying it on the books as a dead loss—they'll be tickled to unload and get some money out of it. From your end it's a legitimate transaction and the profit ought to look pretty good on your efficiency report. And one other thing. If you don't authorize it I'll have to apply for a leave of absence to help my brother out. The Agency will grant it with pleasure—you know how eager they are to get rid of me. And of course that would leave you without anybody to pull your chestnuts out. You haven't got anybody else in the division who can handle the dirty jobs. You'd get fired, you know."

"You fat bastard."

* * *

FORAN WAS slight and neat. The word dapper is out of fashion but it fits. He had wavy black hair and a swimming-pool tan and the look of a nightclub maître-d' who'd made good.

It took me a week to get the appointment with him, a week of meeting people and letting a word drop here and a hint there, softly and with discretion. I'm good at establishing the bona fides of a phony cover identity and in this case it was dead easy because the only untruth in the cover story was my name: I didn't want him to know I had any relationship with Eddie.

His office on the top floor of a nine-story high-rise had a lot of expensive wood, chrome and leather. The picture windows gave views of the city like aerial postcard photographs. It was cool inside—the air conditioning thrummed gently—but you could see heat waves shimmering in the thin smog above the flat sprawling city: the stuff was noxious enough to thin out the view of the towering mountain ranges to the north and east. I felt a bit wilted, having come in from that.

Foran had a polished desk a bit smaller than the deck of an escort carrier; it had a litter of papers and an assortment of gewgaws made of ebony and petrified wood. He stood up and came affably around this display to shake my hand. His smile was cool, professional: behind it a ruthlessness he didn't bother to conceal.

He had a deep confident voice. "Tell me about the proposition."

"I'm looking to borrow some money. I'm not offering a prospectus."

"If my firm authorizes a loan we have to know what it's being used for." He settled into his swivel chair and waited.

"What you want to know," I said, "is whether you'll get your money back and whether I'll make the interest payments on time."

"I don't know you, Mr. Ballantyne. Why should I lend you money?"

"I'm not being cute," I said. "If I lay out the details to

you, what's to keep you from buying into the deal in my place while I'm still out scrounging for capital?"

"That's a risk you have to take. You'd take the same chance with anybody else, unless you've got a rich uncle. At least give me the outlines of the deal—it'll give us a basis for discussion."

I brooded at him as if making up my mind. I gave it a little time before I spoke. "All right. Let's assume the government owns a small private company with certain tangible assets that are of limited value to any domestic buyer, but might be of enormous value to certain foreign buyers to whom the present owner is not impowered to sell. You get my drift?"

"An arms deal?"

"In a way. Not guns and ammunition, nothing that bald. The way this is set up, I'll be breaking no laws."

"Go on."

"You've had a few days to check me out," I said. "I assume you know I work for the Government?"

"Yes."

"I'm about to retire. This deal will set me up for it. I need money to swing it, and it's got to come from somebody like you. But let me make it clear that if you try any odd footwork on me you'll find yourself in more trouble than you want to deal with."

His smile was as cold as Myerson's. "Did you come here to threaten me or to borrow money?"

I sat back. "The CIA founded, or bought, a number of private aviation companies fifteen or twenty years ago. They were used for various purposes. Cover fronts for all sorts of operations. They used some of them to supply revolutionary forces, some of them to run bombing missions against unfriendly countries, some of them to train Cuban exiles and that sort of thing. It was broken by the press several years ago, you know the story."

"Yes."

"All right. A few of those companies happened to be here in Arizona. I'm interested in one of those. Ostensibly it was a private air service, one of those shoestring jobs that did everything from private executive charters to cropdusting. After the CIA bought it the facilities were expanded to accommodate air-crew training for student pilots and gunners from Cuba, Haiti, South Vietnam, Hungary and a couple of African countries. Then the lid blew off and the Agency got a black eye because we're not supposed to run covert operations inside the United States. After the publicity we were forced to close down the operation."

"Go on." He was interested.

I said, "The facility's still there. Planes, ammunition, bombs, radar, Link trainers, the whole battery of military training equipment."

"And?"

"And it's on the market. Been on the market for seven or eight years. So far, no buyers. Because the only people who have a use for those facilities are governments that we can't be seen dealing with. Some of those governments would pay through the nose for the equipment — far above its actual value."

"You figure to be a go-between?"

"I know those countries. I've got the contacts. And I've recently chartered a little shell corporation in Nassau that I set up for this deal. The way it goes, I buy the company and its assets from the Government. I turn around and sell it to the Nassau shell corporation. The shell corporation sells the stuff wherever it wants — it's in the Bahamas, it's outside the jurisdiction of American laws. When we make the sale, the shell corporation crates up the assets in Arizona and ships them out of the country on a Bahamian bill of

lading, and then they're reshipped out of Nassau on a new ticket so that there's no evidence in this country of the final destination. As I said, the buyers are lined up—they'll be bidding against one another and I'll take the high bid."

He was flicking his upper lip with his fingernail. He looked deceptively sleepy. With quiet brevity he said, "How much?"

"To buy the aviation company and pay the packing and shipping and incidental costs I figure one million nine hundred thousand. I'd rather call it two million in case I run into a snag somewhere—it's better to have a cushion. It's a bargain actually—the Government paid upwards of fifteen million for that stuff."

"Maybe. But what condition is it in now? It could be rusty or obsolete or both."

"Obsolete for the U.S. Air Force, maybe, but not for a South American country. And it's all serviceable. It needs a good dusting, that's all. I've had it checked out."

"How much profit do you expect to realize?"

"That's classified. Let's just say I intend to put a floor under the bidding of three million five."

"Suppose you can't get that much? Suppose you don't get any bids at all?"

"I'm not going into this as a speculation. I've already made the contacts. The deal's ready to go down. All I have to do is name the time and place for the auction—but I've got to own the facilities before I can deliver them."

"Suppose we made you a loan, Mr. Ballantyne. And suppose you put the money in your pocket and skipped out to Tahiti."

"All right. Suppose we draw up contracts. If I don't pay the interest and principal you forclose the company. The assets will remain right here in Arizona until I've sold them and received the cash down payment, which will be enough

to repay your loan. If I skip out with the money you'll have the assets—and with them a list of the interested governments. Fair enough?"

"We'll see. Two million is a great deal of money."

"Did I ask you for two million? I've got my own sources of private capital who want to buy in for small shares. I've raised six hundred thousand on my own. The loan I need is for one million four." That was elementary psychology: scare him with a big amount, then reduce it attractively.

Then I dropped the clincher on him. I said, "I'll need the money for no more than six weeks. I'll pay one percent a day, no holidays, for six weeks. That works out to just short of six hundred thousand dollars interest. You lend me one million four, you get back two million."

"I'll have to check this out first. The name of the company?"

I knew I had him.

* * *

MARGARET LOOKED TIRED but she covered the strain with her smile. She set out cheese and biscuits in the living room while I mixed the drinks.

She said, "They haven't found any internal bleeding. He's going to be all right." She cut me a wedge of cheddar. "He's a foolish man sometimes but he didn't deserve this. Money's only money. Eddie—he's like a kid playing games. The money's just a counter, it's the way you keep score. If you lose a game you don't kill your opponent—you just set up the board and start another game."

"Foran doesn't play by those rules, Margaret. Eddie knew that."

She drank; I heard the ice cubes click against her teeth. "Did Foran go for it?"

"I won't know for a while. He's checking things out. But I think he'll buy it. He's too greedy to pass it up. The easiest mark for a con man is another crook."

"If he's checking things out, is there anything for him to find?"

"I doubt it. Most of what I told him was true. My boss set up the Nassau shell corporation for me. It'll be there when Foran looks for it. The Arizona Charter Company exists, it's on the Government's books just as I told him it was, and the assets and facilities are exactly as I described them to him."

"If you pull if off, Charlie, they'll come after you."

"I don't think they'll find me. And I don't think I'll lose any sleep over it." I smiled to reassure her. People had been trying to kill me for more than thirty years and many of them were far more adept at it than the brand of thugs that Foran and his kind employed.

I knew one thing. If Foran didn't fall for this scam I'd just get at him another way. In any case Foran was all finished. Eddie and Margaret didn't know it but they had pitted the most formidable antagonist of all against Foran. I'm Charlie Dark. I'm the best there is.

* * *

THE RESULTS of his investigations seemed to satisfy Foran. His lawyers drew up the most ironclad contract I'd ever seen. Not a single item of Arizona Charter Company equipment was to be moved off its present airfield location until every penny of the loan had been paid back. The only thing the contract didn't include was the vigorish—the actual usurious interest rate: on paper we had an above-board agreement at 16% annual interest with a foreclosure date six weeks from the date of signatures.

The money was in the form of a bank cashier's check and I endorsed it over to the Government in exchange for the deed to all outstanding stock in the Arizona Charter Company. I flew back from Washington to Tucson with the deed and stock certificates in an attaché case chained to

my wrist. Twelve hours later they were in a safe deposit box to which Foran had the second key, so that if I skipped out without paying, he would have possession of the documents and stock certificates. If I didn't repay him within forty days he would be the legal owner of the company and all its assets.

We shook hands at the bank and I departed for the airport, whence I flew to Phoenix and rented a car. By midnight I was on the desert airfield that belonged to me. I dismissed the night watchman and took over the premises. As soon as I was alone I began setting the demolition charges.

There was nobody to prevent my destroying my own property. I had canceled all the insurance policies the day before, so that I was perpetrating no fraud. It was my own property: I was free to do whatever I pleased with it.

The explosions would have thrilled any twelve-year-old war movie fan. When the debris settled I drove to the hospital to say goodbye to Eddie and Margaret.

Eddie's eyes twinkled. "Mainly I regret he'll never know I had anything to do with it."

"Keep it that way. If he ever found out he'd finish you."

"I know. I'm not that much of a twit—not any more."

Margaret said, "What will happen to Foran?"

"Nothing pleasant," I said. "It can't have been his own money, not all of it. He's not that rich. He must have laid off a good part of the loan on his Mob associates. At least a million dollars, I'd guess. When he doesn't pay them back they'll go after him the way he went after Eddie."

Then I smiled. "And that, you know, is what they call justice."

* * *

Challenge for Charlie

THIS TOOK PLACE several years ago; I must make that clear.

Normally Helsinki is one of my favorite towns but this time I was reluctant to return there because the job was the toughest one Myerson had yet put into my ample lap and the adversary was Mikhail Yaskov, who was—bar one—the best in the business.

Yaskov and I had crossed paths obliquely several times down through the Cold War decades but I had never been sent head-to-head against him before and the truth is I was not eager to face this assignment, although—vanity being what it is—I believed I probably could best him. "Probably" is not a word that gets much of a workout in my lexicon; usually I know I can win before I start playing the game; but with Yaskov I'd be dead if I became overconfident.

The job was simple on the face of it: straightforward. As usual the assignment had come to our section because of the odd politics of international espionage which sometimes can cause simple jobs to become sensitive ones. If it's a job that would embarrass anybody then it usually gets shoveled into our department.

In this case I was America's friendly right hand, extended to a country that needed assistance not because of any lack of skill or courage (the Finns excel in cleverness and toughness) but because of a fine delicacy of politics.

Finland is virtually the only country to have fought a

war with Russia in modern times and not lost it. Finland is the only country in Europe that fought against the Red Army in World War II and did not get occupied by the Russians as a result. Finland is the only country in Europe that has repaid, to the penny, the postwar reconstruction loans proffered by the Western powers. Yes, I like the Finns.

They share a border with the Soviet Union. The world being what it is, they make a few concessions to the Russians by way of trade agreements and the like. Soviet-made cars are sold in Finland, for example, although few Finns choose to drive them; the Finns don't admit it loudly in public but they loathe the Russians and if you want a clout in the face a good way to earn one is to state within a Finn's earshot that Finland is within the Soviet sphere of influence. It emphatically is not; Finland is neither a Communist country nor an intimidated one. It is, however, a nation of realists and while it does not bow obsequiously to the Soviets, neither does it go out of its way rudely to offend them. It treads a middle ground between hostility and friendship, the object being the preservation of Finnish independence rather than the influencing of power blocs. Finland practices true and admirable neutrality.

Mikhail Yaskov was an old fashioned master spy. He had run strings of agents everywhere in the West—usually with brilliant success. The only American agents I knew of who'd come level against him were Miles Kendig, who was said to be dead now, and my colleague Joe Cutter, who by then was running our operations out in the Far East. I was the only one left in Langley who had a prayer of besting Yaskov so I was the one picked to fly to Finland.

The KGB had sent Yaskov into Helsinki because of chronic failures in the Soviet espionage network there. The Finns were too shrewd for most of the Russian colonels who showed up at the Soviet Embassy in ill-fitting Moscow

serge disguised as chauffeurs of Second Secretaries or Trade Mission delegates. The apparatus was a shambles and the Organs in Moscow had dispatched Yaskov to take charge in Helsinki, as if the KGB network were a musical comedy having trouble in New Haven and Yaskov were Abe Burrows sent in to doctor it up.

Yaskov was too sharp to put his foot in anything and there was no likelihood of his giving the Finns sufficient legitimate reason to deport him. If they declared him *persona non grata* in the absence of clear evidence of his perfidy, it would provoke Moscow's wrath: this Helsinki preferred to avoid.

Therefore as a gesture of good will I was flown to Helsinki to find a way to get Yaskov out of the country and keep him out—without involving the Finnish government.

It was a bloody impossible job against a bloody brilliant opponent. But I wasn't really worried. I'm the best, bar none.

* * *

IN MY TIME I have pulled off a number of cute and sometimes complicated capers and I suppose, given my physique and age, I could aptly be called a confidence man rather than a man of action. But Yaskov was not susceptible to confidence games. He wasn't a man to be fooled by elaborate tricks—he knew them all; in fact he'd invented most of them.

There really was only one way to attack him: head-on and straight up. And I had only two weapons to employ against him—his own vanity and his awareness of mortality.

* * *

I MADE the call from a public coin phone in the cavernous Stockmann department store.

Comrade Yaskov could not come to the telephone im-

mediately. Could the caller please leave a number to be called back?

No, I could not. I would call again in an hour. Please tell Comrade Mikhail Aleksandrovitch to expect my call. Thank you.

When I called again Yaskov came to the phone and chuckled at me in his suave avuncular fashion. He had a rich deep voice and spoke excellent English with an Oxford inflection. "How good to hear your voice, Charlie. I do hope we can get together and exchange notes about the Lapland scenery. Two foreigners in a strange land and all that. Perhaps we can meet informally."

"By all means."

It was elementary code, designed to set up a meeting without witnesses or seconds.

I said, "Do you happen to know a fellow named Tower?"

"The Senator from Texas?"

"No. Here in Finland."

"I see. Yes, I know of him."

"Perhaps we could meet him tomorrow."

"Where?"

"I don't mind, Mikhail. You pick a spot."

"Would Tavern Number Four suit you?"

"Fine, I'll see you there." I smiled and cradled the phone.

There was a place called the Tavern #4 but we wouldn't be there. The conversation had been designed to mislead anyone who might be eavesdropping on the call—one could depend on the Soviet Embassy's lines being tapped, possibly by several different organizations. The fellow named Tower was in fact a place—the town of Lahti, within fair commuting distance of Helsinki; the town was known for its landmark, a great high water tower that loomed on stilts above the piney landscape. The number four established the time for the meeting.

I was there at three, an hour ahead of schedule, to inspect the area and insure it hadn't been primed with spies or ambushers. My eyes don't miss much; after forty minutes I felt secure and awaited Yaskov openly in the parking lot.

It was a pleasant sunny day with a touch of autumn chill creeping south from Lapland: Lahti is hardly 100 kilometres north of Helsinki and the forest cools the air.

Precisely at four Yaskov arrived. It might have been seemly and sensible for him to drive himself, in a Soviet-built Moskvitch or Pobeda, but Yaskov was fond of his comforts and he sailed elegantly into view in the back seat of a chauffeur-driven silver Mercedes limousine. Like me he was a man who stood out in crowds anyway—he was not the sort of executive who dwelt in anonymity—and I believe The Organs must have put up with his ostentatious eccentricities on account of the excellence of his performances.

The chauffeur was, so far as I could tell, simply a chauffeur; his face did not flash any mug photos against the screen of my mind. He could have been a recent recruit or an agent whose face had not been put on file in the West but I doubted it because if the man were of any importance Yaskov would not have exposed his face to me. The chauffeur trotted around to open the limousine's back door and Yaskov emerged smiling, uncoiling himself joint by joint, a very tall lean handsome figure in Saville Row pinstripes, a Homburg tipped askew across his silver hair. His pale intense blue eyes, illuminated from within, were at once the shrewdest and kindest eyes I'd ever known and I had always attributed part of his success to those extraordinary sighted organs: I suspected they had inspired more candor from his victims than had all the drugs and torture apparatus in the Arbat and Lubianka. Yaskov could charm the Sphinx out of its secrets.

As always he carried a cane. He owned an extensive collection of them. This one was a Malacca, suitably gnarled and gleaming. The excuse was an old leg injury of some kind but he walked as gracefully as an athlete and the cane was a prop, an affectation and I suppose if necessary a weapon.

He transferred it to his left hand and gave me his quick firm handshake. "Such a pleasure to see you again. When was our last meeting, do you recall?"

"Paris, two years ago. When we were all chasing Kendig." He remembered it as well as I did but it was a harmless amenity and we both smiled. I said, "Why don't we take my car?"—drawling it with grave insouciance: I didn't want the chauffeur around.

"Why not indeed," Yaskov said carelessly. He made a vague sign to the grey-uniformed man, instructing him to wait by the limo, and followed me to my hired Volvo.

We drove out of town along a country road that curled gently through the forest. I made a right here, a left there. After twenty minutes—small talk between us—I pulled onto the verge and we walked across a carpet of pine needles to the edge of a crystal blue lake. Central Finland has thousands of such lakes, each as postcard beautiful as the next; with a suitable net you can scoop up your supper from the bottom—fresh-water crayfish.

There was a log, strategically placed, and I sat down on one end of it. "I'm not bugged."

"Nor am I. Shall we go through the wretched tedium of searching each other?"

"We're both a bit long in the tooth for that kind of nonsense.

"I agree."

We trusted each other to that extent mainly because we were such fossils. We antedated the computer boys with

their electronic gadgetry; we were the last of the tool-making men: we'd had to polish our wits rather than our mathematical aptitudes. In our decrepitude we still preferred to walk without the crutches of microphones and long lenses and calculator-cyphers. To do so would have been a confession of weakness.

He said, "You seem heavier than you were."

"Maybe. I rarely weigh myself."

"Don't they have physical requirements in Myerson's section?"

"For everybody but me." I said it with a measure of pride and he picked it up; his warm eyes laughed at me.

Then he said, "I too. You know I have a serious heart condition."

"Yes, I know that."

"I'd have been astonished if you didn't. It is a secret only from some of my own superiors." He laughed again, silently, and settled on the log next to me, prodding the earth with his cane.

I studied the toes of his polished cordovan shoes. "This is a bit dicey, Mikhail. You may have guessed why I've been posted here."

"May I assume the Company wishes me out of the Finn's hair?"

"You may."

"Well then." He smiled gently.

I said, "You've got a villa on the Black Sea, I hear."

"For my retirement."

"Nice place?"

"One of the largest of them. Magnificent view. Every room is wired with quadriphonic speakers for my collection of concert recordings. It's quite an imposing place. It belonged to a Romanov."

"It's a wonder to me how your bourgeois conceits

haven't got you in trouble with your superiors in the classless state."

"A man is rewarded for his worth, I suppose."

"You should have been born to an aristocracy."

"I was. My father was a duke."

"Oh yes. I'd forgotten." I hadn't forgotten, of course; I was simply endeavoring to prime the pump."

On the far side of the lake a rowboat appeared from an inlet and proceeded slowly right to left, a young couple laughing. I heard the faint slap of the oars. I said, "I hope you'll be able to enjoy the villa."

"Why shouldn't I, Charlie?"

"You might die in harness."

He chuckled avuncularly.

I said, "It would be a waste of all those quadriphonic speakers."

"I've often thought it would," he agreed with grave humor.

"I don't have a villa," I said.

"No. I suppose you don't."

"I've got nothing squirreled away. I spend everything I earn. I have four-star tastes. If they retired me right now I'd be out in the street with a tin cup."

"What, no pension?"

"Sure. Enough to live on if you can survive in a mobile home in Florida."

"Of course that wouldn't do." He squinted at me suspiciously. "Are you asking me for money? Are you proposing to sell out?"

"I guess not."

"I'm relieved. I would accept your defection, of course, but I wouldn't enjoy it. I prefer to see my judgments vindicated—I've always respected you. It would be an awful blow if you were to disappoint me. In any case," and

he smiled beautifully, "I wouldn't have believed it for a moment."

"The trouble with Charlie Dark," I said, "I have champagne tastes and a beer income. I'm way past retirement age. I can't fend them off forever. I'm older than you are, you know—"

"Only by a year or two."

"—and they're eager to put me out to pasture. I'm an eyesore. My presence embarrasses them. They think we all should look like Robert Redford."

"How boring that would be."

I said, "This time they're offering me an inducement. A whopping bonus if I pull this last job off."

"Am I to be your last job?"

"Charlie's last case. A fitting climax to a brilliant career." He laughed. "How much am I worth, then?"

"If I told you it would only inflate your conceit even more. Let's just say I'll be able to put up at Brown's and the Ritz for the rest of my life if I take a notion to."

"I don't believe very much of this, Charlie."

"That's too bad. I was hoping you would. It would have made this easier for both of us." I took the pistol out of my pocket.

Yaskov regarded it without fear. One side of his lip bent upward and his eyebrow lifted. Across the lake the young couple in the rowboat had disappeared past a forested tongue of land; we were alone in the world.

I said, "It's only a twenty-five caliber and I don't know much about these things but at this range it hardly matters. With your heart condition your system won't withstand the shock."

"It's a tiresome bluff, Charlie."

"That's the problem, don't you see? I don't want to shoot you. But you're not going to leave me any choice.

I can't think of any way short of shooting you to convince you that I'm not bluffing."

He poked at the pine needles with his cane. I gave him a look. "Can you think of any?"

"Not offhand." He gestured toward my pistol with the head of the Malacca. "You'd better go ahead."

"We've got plenty of time. Maybe if we put our heads together we can think of an alternative."

"I doubt it. You're quite right, Charlie—I don't believe you'll do it. I believe it's an empty threat."

I studied the pistol, an unfamiliar object in my hand. "At least I know where the safety catch is. I think of this thing as a nuclear arsenal—a deterrent force. If you ever actually have to use it, it's too late."

"Yes, quite."

"But that doesn't make it impotent. The nukes are real, you know. This thing's loaded."

"I'm sure it is. But a loaded gun is no danger to anyone until there's a finger willing to pull the trigger."

I said, "It's a fascinating dilemma. I guess it comes down to a comparison of relative values. Which is more important to you—your life or your self-respect? Which is more important to me—the conceit of never resorting to violence or the promise of luxury for the rest of my life?"

"It's no good, Charlie. You'll have to kill me. There's no alternative at all. Look here, suppose I agreed to leave Finland and never return. Would that satisfy you?"

"Yes."

He said, "It would be easy for me to agree to that. Here: I promise you I'll leave Finland tomorrow and never return. How's that?"

"Fine. We can go now." I smiled but didn't stir.

"You see it's no good. I have only to break my word. My people would begin the hunt for you immediately. And

it would be you, not I, who would end with a bullet in him."

"Ah, but if you kill me then they'll send the whole Langley Agency after you and they won't sleep until they've nailed you. They've got their pride too. No, Mikhail, you can't do it that way."

"Not to be terribly rude, old boy, but I really doubt they'd care that much. They're trying to get rid of you anyway. I might be doing them a favor." He spread his hands to the sides, the cane against one palm. "Charlie, it's no good, that's all. You've never killed a man in cold blood. In fact you've never killed a man at all, have you?"

"No. But obviously I'm not a pacifist or I'd be in some other line of work. I believe in protecting oneself and one's interests."

The rowboat reappeared, heading home. I put the gun away in my pocket to hide its telltale gleam from the young lovers but I kept my hand on it and kept the muzzle pointed in Mikahil's direction. I said, "Your running dogs aren't good enough to sniff me out. You know that. While they were looking for me I'd be looking for you. Sooner or later I'd reach you. You know as well as I do that there's no way on earth to prevent a determined adversary from killing a man."

"There's one. Kill the adversary first. Unlike you I have no compunctions about that."

"Thing is, Mikhail, right now I'm the one with the gun. There's also the fact that I'm only a replaceable component. If I'm taken out they'll just send someone else to finish the job."

"Joe Cutter, no doubt?"

"Probably. And Joe isn't as peaceable as I am."

"On the other hand he's not quite as good as you are, Charlie. I could best him. I'm not sure I could best you—not if you were actually determined to kill me."

"And the next one after him, and the next after that?"

"Oh, they'd grow weary of it; they'd cut their losses."

"If nothing else, I think your heart wouldn't stand the strain."

The smile drifted from his gaunt handsome face; he regarded me gloomily. "Do you know what I'm thinking about?"

"I guess so. You're thinking about the comforts of those quadriphonic rooms and the untidiness of trying to operate in a country where the enemy superpower wants you out. You're thinking I'm never going to give you any peace. You're thinking how you like me as much as I like you, and you don't want to kill me any more than I want to kill you. You're thinking there's got to be a way out of this impasse."

"Quite."

The rowboat was gone again. I heard the lazy buzz of a light plane in the distance. Yaskov drew doodles in the earth with his cane.

I said, "You can leave any time you want. You write your own ticket. You volunteered for this post, I imagine, and you can volunteer our. No loss of face. The climate doesn't agree with your heart condition."

He smiled again, shaking his head, and I took the pistol out of my pocket. "I want that bonus. I want it a lot, Mikhail. It's my last chance at it."

He only brooded at me, shaking his head a bit, and I lifted the pistol. I aimed it just past his face. I said, "If I pulled the trigger it won't hit you. You'll get a powder burn maybe. The first time I shoot you'll flinch but you'll sit there and smile bravely. The second time my hand will start to tremble because I'm not used to this kind of thing. I'll get nervous and that'll make you get nervous. I'll shoot again and you'll have a harder time hanging onto that cute

defiant smile. And so on until your heart can't stand it any more. When they find your body of course they'll do an autopsy and they'll find out you died from a heart attack. My conscience will be a bit stained but I'll live with it. *I want that bonus.*"

He sighed, studying my face with an impassive scrutiny; after a long time he made up his mind. "Then I suppose you shall get it," he said, and I knew I'd won.

* * *

YASKOV LEFT Finland at the end of the week and I returned to Virginia to other assignments. As I said, these events took place several years ago. Recently I had a call from an acquaintance in the Soviet trade delegation in Washington and I met her for drinks at a bar in Georgetown.

She said, "Comrade Yaskov sends his regards."

"Tell Mikhail Aleksandrovitch I hope he's enjoying his villa."

"He's dying, Mr. Dark."

"I'm very sorry."

"I'm instructed to ask you a question in his behalf."

"I know the question. Tell him the answer is no—I was not bluffing."

I thought of it as a last gift from me to Mikhail. In truth the whole play had been a bluff; I would not have killed him under any circumstances. I lied to him at the end because it would have been churlish and petty to puncture his self-esteem on his deathbed. Far better to let him die believing he had sized me up correctly. It meant he would think less of me, for compromising my principles. But I guessed I could live with that. It was a small enough price to pay. You see, I really did like him.

Still, I suspect he may have had the last laugh. It has been several months since the lady and I had drinks in

Georgetown. To the best of my knowledge Yaskov is still very much alive; now and then an evidence of his fine hand shows up in one operation or another. I suspect he's still pulling strings from his Black Sea villa — directing operations from his concert-hall surroundings. It leads me to believe he was simply growing tired of field work, tired of pulling inept Soviet colonels' chestnuts out of fires, tired of living in dilapidated embassies with enemies breathing down his collar. He was looking for an excuse to return home and I gave him an excellent one. As the years go by I become increasingly uncertain as to which of us was the real winner.

* * *

Charlie in Moscow

THE PLANE DELIVERED ME to Sheremetevo at eleven Tuesday morning but it was past three by the time the Attaché's car brought me to the Embassy: the Soviets get their jollies from subjecting known American agents to bureaucratic harrassment.

After my interminable session with insulting civil servants and the infuriating immigration apparatus I was dour and irritable and, overriding everything else, hungry.

As we drove in I had a look at the Embassy and saw the smudges above the top-story windows where the fire had licked out and charred the stonework. I made a face.

I introduced myself at the desk and there was a flurrying of phoning and bootlicking. I was directed to the third floor and managed to persuade one of the secretaries to send down for a portable lunch. Predictably I was kept waiting in Dennis Sneden's outer office and I ate the sandwiches there, after which—20 minutes having passed—I stood up on the pretext of dropping the lunch debris in the blonde receptionist's wastebasket. When she looked up, startled, I said, "Tell him he's kept me cooling my heels long enough."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I know you all resent my coming. But making me sore won't help any of us. Punch up the intercom and tell him I'm coming in." I strode past her desk to the door.

"Sir, you can't—"

"Don't worry, I know the way."

* * *

SNEDEN WAS on the phone. He looked up at me, no visible break of expression on his pale features, and said into the mouthpiece, "Hang on a minute." He covered it with his palm. "Sit down, Charlie, I'll only be a minute."

The blonde was behind me, possible trying to decide how to eject me by force. It would have been a neat feat in view of the fact that I outweighed her by two-and-a-half to one. After Sneden had addressed me with civility she changed her mind, made an apologetic gesture of exasperation to Sneden and withdrew.

He said into the phone, "Nothing we can do until we know more about it. Listen, Charlie Dark's here, he just walked into the office. I'll have to call you back—we should have an update later. . . . Right. Catch you." He cradled it and tried to smile at me.

The chair was narrow; I had to perch. Through the high window I had a distant glimpse of the Kremlin's crenelated onion towers.

Sneden looked pasty, his flat puffy face resembling the crust of a pie; I attributed the sickly look to chagrin over what had happened and fear for his job. I said, "I'm not necessarily here to embarrass you."

"No?"

"The Security Executive—Myerson—wants a firsthand report. And I'm to lend a hand if it seems desirable."

"Desirable to whom?"

"Me."

"That's what I thought." He lit a cigarette. His fingers didn't tremble visibly. "It was a freak."

"Was it set? Arson?"

"We don't know yet. It's being investigated."

"But there were Russian firemen inside the building."

"Moscoe fire department. We had to. But not on the top floor. We handled that ourselves with portable extinguishers – it never got too bad up there, we caught it before it spread that far."

"You know for a fact there's no possibility any of them got up to the top floor, no matter how briefly?"

"No possibility. None. Our people were at the head of the stairs to cordon it."

"I'll accept that, then."

"Thank you," Dennis said. "I'm in charge of security here. I do my job." But his eyes drifted when he said it; then he sighed. "Most of the time. As you know, there's one point of uncertainty."

"The safe on the third floor."

"Yeah."

"Tell me about it."

"It was all in my report through the bag."

"Go over it again for me."

He said, "Charlie, what's the point? I doubt anybody got into the safe. There's no sign anything's been disturbed. But there's a one-in-a-thousand chance that it happened and we have to be guided by that – we have to assume the safe was compromised."

"Hell of an expensive assumption, Dennis."

"I know. I can't help it."

"Files covering several current covert operations."

"Ongoing operations, right."

"Including the identities of at least eleven of our agents."

"Yes. But everything's in code."

"Never was a cowboy that couldn't be throwed, never was a horse that couldn't be rode. Dennis, there never was a code that couldn't be broke."

"I know. But each operational file is kept in a different code. The Control on each operation has access only to his own codes."

"Who assigns the codes?"

"I do. Part of my job."

"Then nobody else can decipher more than one case-officer's files without access to your code books?"

"Well, they're not code books any more, they're computer programs, but in essence you're correct. Nobody can decode more than a few of those files at a time."

"Unless they manage to break all the codes simultaneously," I said. "If they breached those files with a camera we have to write off six current operations and eleven crucially valuable agents."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, Charlie, but only two of them are crucially valuable. The other nine are just nice to have but in the cruel impersonal terms of modern espionage they're expendable." He was fiddling with his windproof cigarette lighter, flicking the lid open and shut. "We've already taken preliminary steps to shut down the capers and cover our tracks."

"Good."

"The safe was unlocked—before, during and after the fire. In the excitement it didn't occur to anybody to lock it. I guess that's my fault; it's my job to maintain security."

"Your loyalty to your subordinates is commendable, Dennis, but it doesn't solve the problem."

Dennis patted ash ferociously from his cigarette, missed the ash tray and bent down to blow the ashes off the desk. I said, "Did the Comrades or did they not photograph the contents of the safe?"

"There's no way to find out. Not for a while until we start getting feedback from them."

"That could be too late. I'll need to have a look at those files."

* * *

I SPENT most of the night with the files and a brown bag full of cooling hamburgers from the cafeteria downstairs. By the end of it I realized why Myerson had picked me for this one. Whenever a job comes along that requires both ingenuity and mortal risk he likes to throw it at me because, whatever the outcome, he can't lose. If I come a cropper then my embarrassment, injury, incarceration or demise will provide him with perverse satisfaction; if I succeed in bringing off the impossible then the success will reflect on Myerson and he will climb higher in the favor of the Langley executives.

The files offered me half a dozen covert capers-in-progress to select from. All of them were espionage operations involving hired Russians who'd been subverted by the American station operatives, usually for money, less often by means of blackmail or other shady coercions. None of them was selling his country out for ideological reasons; spies seldom do except in movies.

The eleven agents listed in the coded files from the Embassy's safe were unimportant people for the most part—two of them were charwomen with access to certain wastebaskets; others were clerks, countermen, typists, a telephone repairman, a minor commissar's chauffeur, a computer technician, a laboratory assistant.

I found possibilities in two of the six operations although the risks in both cases would be high: one misstep and I could find myself in the Lubianka dungeons with electrodes affixed to my tender parts. There were several KGB types who would delight in getting me into such a plight.

* * *

DENNIS WAS still nervous. "I could be in bad trouble."

"Take it easy. The worst you'll suffer may be early retirement. You've only got ten months left anyway."

"Just the same—"

"Don't ask me to cover up anything, Dennis. I'm not in the whitewash trade."

"I wouldn't do that. What do you take me for? We've known each other too long for you to say that to me, Charlie." But he said it too fast and I focused my gaze on the summary sheets so that I wouldn't compound his guilt by witnessing it.

He annoyed me, putting his petty career concerns ahead of the job at hand, but it was understandable. A black mark on his service record this late in his career would hurt his chances to get a top job in civilian security; it could make the difference between the prestige positions in aerospace corporate counterespionage and the routine jobs with the security departments of small banks.

I took out one of the summary sheets. "We'll concentrate on this one. It's our best shot. The MIG-32 designs."

"Why?"

"If they've learned about the leak they'll plug it—start feeding us phony information." I tapped the document and it made the flimsy flashpaper rattle. "You've got two people inside the MIG-32 program feeding us data on aircraft development and weapons systems. If the KGB got a copy of this file from our safe they'll put surveillance on these two agents."

"Maybe not. They may try to fool us by leaving the two alone."

"Any of the other capers, yes. But this one's too sensitive. They can't afford *not* to plug a leak in the MIG-32 program. It's the most advanced fighter-bomber design in the world. If they get it into production within the next few years they'll be a dozen years ahead of us—unless we can build countermeasures around our stolen copies of their designs. With that much at stake they can't play cute games with

our intelligence people. If they know these two guys are working for us they'll either double them or transfer them to a less sensitive sector to get them away from access to top secret data."

"Well, if the two guys get transferred we'll know about it."

"Yeah."

He said, "But how will we know if they're doubled?"

"Why, we'll ask one of them, Dennis."

* * *

I GAVE it two days because I wanted to be sure the KGB had time to make their move if they were going to make one. Thursday after dark Sneden and I left the Embassy in an official limousine and led the Russian shadow-cars around the city a while. Then near the old Ekaterinburg Station we pulled around a corner far enough ahead to be out of their sight just long enough for the two of us to get out of the car and hide in the shadows while our driver went on toward the British Embassy, where by prearrangement he would enter the underground garage, wait three hours, then return along the same route to pick us up.

Free of the tail we walked four blocks along poorly lit streets to an unexceptional third-story flat that belonged to a French journalist who was away covering a trade fair in Riga. We'd had the flat swept for bugs that afternoon and in any case I carred a jammer in my briefcase. I don't have any fondness for those gimcracks but sometimes there's no choice.

Dennis made a drink and left me alone with it; he didn't want Poltov to see his face. Poltov had been recruited by another Control and was run by a cutout, all standard procedure, and Poltov had no idea who his real boss was. It didn't matter if he saw my face; I'd be out of the country

soon anyway; but Dennis had to be protected—he was Embassy staff.

Poltov arrived at half past eleven. He was a neat small fellow with carefully combed grey hair and the conceited self-confidence of a Cockney pimp. He had something to do with computers—a fact that had made him a great prize to Dennis Sneden's department because it gave Poltov access to every question, answer and program that went through the computer banks on the MIG-32 project.

He introduced himself and shook my hand; he seemed amused by my corpulence. He made himself a drink without asking. Cognac, I noticed—none of the domestic trash for him. He'd be much more comfortable in sharkskin than in the drab Moscow serge he wore; he had ambitions to be dapper. One day, with the money we were paying him, he'd find his way to Austria or Denmark and set himself up in luxury.

When he had tasted the cognac he smiled at me. He spoke a hard Kharkov Russian that I had a little trouble following. "May I ask who you are?"

"Call me Tovarich Ivanovitch if you like," I said.

"Your accent is atrociously American."

"I'm not much of a linguist. They gave me the eight-week course at the Army school in Monterrey. Sit down, Tovarich, and tell me what unusual things have happened to you in the past forty-eight hours."

"Unusual? Yes—there's been one thing."

"What was it?"

"The summons to this meeting." He smiled again, enjoying his little joke.

"Other than that, nothing out of the ordinary?"

"No."

"No break in routine? No phone calls from strangers? No odd encounters? No questions?"

"Nothing."

"Have you had security briefing? Do you know how to disclose a tail?"

"Yes. I know it if I'm being watched. I'm often watched, it's part of the job. They're clumsy idiots, most of them. I was tailed Monday when I left the computer building. Three men, one car. They shadowed me to the GUM store and then to my flat. I went to bed and in the morning they were gone. It was a routine check on my movements—it happens once or twice a week to all of us. May I ask the reason for these questions?"

"What would you say if I told you that some of the information you've been selling us is false?"

"I would say you are misinformed."

"Poltov, if they've doubled you and you're feeding us false information for them, we'll have you terminated with extreme prejudice. You know the term?"

"Yes. I understand you have the responsibility to do that. But only if I have betrayed you. And I haven't."

"You're too calm about it to suit me," I said. "What, no indignation at the unjust accusation?"

Poltov smiled gently. "We're accustomed to such charges here. Indignation is not a useful response. I am well paid for what I sell to you. My Swiss account grows nicely. I've never sold you false information. If I ever do, I shall expect you to teminate me."

Beneath the fatalistic surface his smile was really quite bright and ingenuous.

* * *

DENNIS WAS cautious. "Why should you believe him?"

"Partly intuition—he's a game player, he enjoys the danger, but he's not devious enough to play both ends against the middle. If he were crossing us he'd be nervous about it."

"I still don't see how—"

I said, "If they saw the files they know he's working for us. And if they know he's working for us they can't afford knowingly to let him go on releasing accurate data to us. The project's too vital to their security. Either they'll falsify the information he acquires, or they'll force him to discontinue delivering it. Either way we'll know it's blown."

He managed a sickly smile. "I hope it turns out he's clean."

"Because if he's clean then your record's clean?"

"Charlie, I'm only human."

"I'm sorry," I said. "The security lapse was there whether or not the Russians managed to take advantage of it."

Brief anger flashed from him but then he slumped behind the desk. "I guess I knew that anyway. Listen—no hard feelings. I know you've been fair." He flicked his windproof lighter open, ignited it and poked his cigarette into the flame.

That was when the phone buzzed. He picked it up, spoke and listened; I watched his face change in a violent exhalation of smoke. When he cradled it he looked angry, then crushed. "The bastards. Begorenko committed suicide this morning."

"Begorenko?"

"One of our agents in the GRU. One of the names in the safe. Charlie, I think it must mean they got into the safe."

* * *

IT CALLED for a council of war. Reinforcements were summoned from the Security Executive—young Leonard Ross flew in from Paris and then we were favored with the presence of Joe Cutter who arrived handsome and alert from Tokyo; finally on Saturday Myerson himself flew in over the Pole from Langley and we had a quorum.

In the Embassy's conference room the jammers were running and the blinds drawn.

First Sneden reported, bringing it up to date. "We lost another one last night. Rastovic jumped off the roof of a block of flats in Leningrad. Less than forty-eight hours after Begorenko's death. Of course we don't know if they killed themselves or if they were suicided by the Organs but means the same thing either way—we're blown. Six operations, eleven operatives. Including the MIG-32 program."

Ross: "Are we sure of that? It couldn't be coincidence?"

Cutter: "Two dead out of eleven? Not a chance."

Sneden: "I'm afraid Joe's right. I feel miserable about this. It's my fault—I was too lax in my guidelines for third-floor security. The safe should never have been unlocked."

Cutter: "Why wasn't it locked?"

Sneden: "Ease of access. We had five different Controls in and out of it all the time. Plus myself and occasionally the First Secretary. If we had to unlock the damn thing every time. . ."

Myerson: "All right, all right. Let's hear from Mr. Dark."

Me: "A couple of curious items. See what you make of them. Item one—evidence of arson. Traces of lighter fluid residue in the wastebasket where the fire started. Any comments?"

Cutter: "The fire had to be set by somebody inside. It was burning before the Russian firemen arrived. Elementary conclusion: a saboteur among us. Elementary question: to what purpose?"

Me: "Elementary answer: to cover something up and/or provide a distraction. Agreed?"

Myerson: "Go on, Charlie."

Me: Item two. As far as we know, the computer infor-

mation coming through from agent Poltov is still clean. If not accurate it's at least plausible to our scientists who've been analyzing it as it comes through. As of last night, when I had my third interview with Poltov, he claimed he'd been neither harassed nor approached."

Ross: "How do we know he's not lying about that? How do we know he hasn't been doubled?"

Myerson: "Intuition, Charlie?"

Me: "No. Logic. If they knew he was feeding us they'd stop him or falsify the data. They've done neither. Therefore they don't know he's ours."

Cutter: "Fascinating."

Me: "I knew you'd be the first one to see the point, Joe. Your mind's always six steps ahead of everybody else's. Next to me you're the best."

Cutter: "I might put it the other way around, there, Charlie."

Me: "You'd be wrong. Your talent's equal to mine but I still have the edge in experience."

Ross: "Well, maybe they only managed to break the codes that dealt with Begorenko and Rastovic. Isn't that possible? Maybe they're still working on the rest of the codes over at Cryptanalysis in the Arbat. Suppose they don't break Poltov's code until next week after we've cleared him? Then what?"

Me: "No. The Russians haven't broken any of our codes at all. They haven't had time. The fire was set Monday. Begorenko died Thursday night late, or if you prefer Friday morning. It takes longer than that to break a top-class code, even with the aid of the best computers. Unless you've got help from somebody on the other side."

Cutter: "The two suicides, Begorenko and Rastovic—let me get absolutely clear on this. They were on separate capers? They had nothing to do with each other? They

didn't even know of each other's existence? They had separate Controls, separate cutouts, separate and distinct codes?"

Sneden: "Correct. Total strangers to each other. One in Moscow, one in Leningrad."

Myerson: "But they were both blown. And the only thing they had in common was that both their names were in the safe on the third floor."

Ross: "Leaving us no choice. We've got to shut down all the operations. Including Poltov."

Sneden: "Well, no. Charlie's just got through saying Poltov's secure. How can we shut him down? It'd be a disaster for us when we're this close to getting the final data on the MIG-32. Nobody wants to close Poltov down. He's the most valuable agent we've got anywhere in the world at this moment in time."

Me: "I agree with Dennis. Poltov's secure. I vote we let him continue running."

Myerson: "I don't follow your reasoning at all. How can we let him run? If it's only a matter of time before they break the code on his file too—"

Me: "I told you. They don't have Poltov's file. They don't have *any* files."

Cutter: "Charlie's right."

Myerson: "Somebody please tell me what's going on here."

Me: "Dennis, you can tell him or I will."

Cutter: "I think the cat's got Dennis's tongue. I guess you've got the floor to yourself, Charlie."

Me: "All right. Not without regret. The Russians never got near the safe; if they had, Poltov would have been transferred, killed or doubled by now. Therefore the information on Begorenko and Rastovic was given selectively to the KGB by someone who didn't mind betraying in-

essential information but balked at selling the hard stuff. It had to be someone inside this Embassy, of course—someone who set the fire so as to make it look as if the safe had been compromised. That way we wouldn't look for a spy in our own ranks; we'd look for a spy in a Russian fireman's uniform instead. That gets our culprit off the hook, covers his tracks. That's what the distraction was for."

Sneden: "That could have been anybody."

Cutter: "Dennis, you're the only one who had access to both codes—the two governing Begorenko and Rastovic."

Me: "And you use that old-fashioned lighter, Dennis. Most of the other smokers here use matches or butane disposables. They don't own lighter fluid. You do."

Cutter: "How much did they pay you, Dennis?"

* * *

Dennis Sneden was ash-white but he held his tongue and refused to meet anyone's eyes. Misery wafted off him like the smell of decay.

I said, "Most of the files are routine information-gathering capers. We buy information whether it's important or not. It all goes into the hopper. Most of it, individually, isn't important to our security. Begorenko sold us statistical data on collective farm output and miscellaneous agricultural information. Rastovic kept us posted on personnel shifts in administrative commissariats in Leningrad. I guess Dennis felt he could sell those without bruising his conscience too badly. He knew his professional future was dim. He wanted a cushion—money for his retirement. A little supplement to the pension. What was it, Dennis? A few hundred thousand in a Swiss account?"

He didn't answer.

Cutter said, "But he's still loyal enough to protect the vital mission. He couldn't sell Poltov to them."

I said, "That was his mistake. Dennis, you really should have blown Poltov. We might never have found you out."

Sneden said quietly, "What do you take me for?"

None of us needed to answer that. After a moment Sneden crushed out his cigarette. "Do I get killed or what?"

Myerson smiled at me. "Charlie broke the case—we'll leave the disposition to him." He got up and wandered out of the room, having lost interest in the proceedings. The bastard. He wanted to force me to order an execution—he knows I don't kill people. He thinks it's because I'm squeamish—it doesn't occur to him that it might be a matter of moral scruple.

I looked at Joe Cutter and Leonard Ross. Neither of them was at all amused. Cutter said, "He's a class-A wonder, Myerson is."

Ross, who is young and collegiate and manages to retain a flavor of naïveté despite several years in the service, brooded at Dennis. "Why the hell did you do it?"

Dennis sat listlessly with smoke trickling from his nostrils. He only stared bleakly at the tabletop; he neither stirred nor responded to Ross's question.

I said, "I don't see any need for blood. Dennis, are you ready to sign a confession?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Joe Cutter said, "You could commit suicide."

"Not me."

"Then you haven't got a choice."

"What if I deny the charges?"

I only stared him down and he understood. If he didn't cooperate he'd be terminated—if not by me then by somebody else working under Myerson's instructions.

"If I sign a confession what happens then?"

I said, "You go to prison. It's the best we can do. We can't have you getting bitter and selling the rest of your

inside knowledge to the Comrades. After a few years you'll get out on parole after the information in your head has become obsolete."

Cutter said, "Take the deal, Dennis. It's a better offer than you'd get anywhere else."

Dennis took the deal.

* * *

I DROVE OUT to the airport with Joe Cutter. When we queued for our flight he said, "One of these days Myerson's going to force you to kill somebody, or get killed."

"He keeps trying to," I agreed. "He's perverse."

"Why don't you get out, then? God knows you're old enough to quit."

"And do what?" I walked away toward the plane.

* * *

Charlie in the Tundra

"ATTU," Myerson said.

"Gesundheit," I replied.

He sneered. "The island of Attu. Westernmost island in the Aleutian chain off the coast of Alaska. Nearer to Siberia than to North America. Pack your woolies, Charlie."

I scowled. "Attu has been of utterly no importance to anybody since May 1943. Is this your version of sending me to Siberia? What are my transgressions?"

"They are too many to enumerate. In fact it might be an interesting idea to see about stationing you there permanently. Do you have any idea how many American soldiers got frostbitten up there in the War? He blew cigar smoke in my face. "The limo's waiting—Ross will brief you on the way to the airport. It seems one of our gadgets is missing."

* * *

"IT WOULD be tedious for us if the Russians got their hands on it," Ross said in the car on the way to my digs to pick up my clothes. "We'd have to change our codes and computer cypher programs."

"Is the pilot all right?"

"Concussion and a few fractures. He should be fine, eventually. Up there they learn how to crack up easy. The Air Force collected the plane and most of the debris and barged it over to the island of Shemya—it's only a few miles away and that's where the Air Force base is."

"I know."

"You've been there before?"

"Twenty-odd years ago on the U-2 program."

Ross was intrigued; he's still a collegiate at heart — young enough to be eager-beaverish. "What's it like up there?"

"The end of the world."

* * *

Ross SAT on the windowsill and watched me pack my thermal socks and longjohns. "Anyway," he said, "it wasn't until they hauled the wreckage back to Shemya and sorted through it that they realized the computer code transceiver was missing. Conclusion is it's still on Attu but they're reluctant to send a team of men back to go over the crash site with microscopes — if the Russians espied the activity they'd realize something important is missing. I suppose if we merely send one man to scout around it won't draw that much attention from their satellite cameras. But one thing I don't understand — why'd they pick on you? It's not your sort of job. Why not use an Air Force man already stationed up there at Shemya? It's only a few miles away."

"It wasn't an Air Force caper," I said. "It was ours. The pilot was ours, the mission was ours and the CCT box is ours. I'm sure the Air Force volunteered to keep looking for it but the Agency told them to lay off — 'We'll take care of it ourselves.' The usual interservice nonsense. As for why me, it's probably because I've been there before. And because if there's a miserably uncomfortable job Myerson always likes to see that it gets tossed in my lap."

"Why don't you quit, Charlie? He makes your life hell and you're past retirement age anyway."

"What, and give Myerson the satisfaction of knowing he drove me out?"

* * *

THE LONG TRIP entailed a change of planes at Seattle, an overnight stop in Anchorage and an all-day island hopping flight out the thousand-mile length of the Aleutian chain aboard one of Bob Reeve's antiquated but sturdily dependable DC-6 bush transports. Flying regular schedules through that weather Reeve's Aleutian Airways has somehow managed to maintain an astonishing record of safety and efficiency—indeed, it is one of the few airlines in the world that conducts a profitable business without Government subsidy.

I was dizzy from crosswind landings and wild takeoffs at Cold Bay, Dutch Harbor and the Adak Naval Base. We bypassed Amchitka because they had fog blowing across the runway at ninety knots. Eventually we mushed down onto Shemya, the penultimate Aleutian—a flat dreary stormy atoll hardly big enough to support the runways of its air field. It was only October but the island was slushy with wet snow. A typical grey Aleutian wind drove the cold mist through me as I lumbered down the portable aircraft stairs and ducked into the waiting blue 4x4 truck.

The only above-ground structures were the enormous reinforced hangars that sheltered our DEW-Line combat planes and the huge kite-winged high-altitude spy planes that had supplanted the U-2 in our Siberian overflight program. The hangars were left over from the War—they'd been built to house B-29 Superfortresses for the invasion of Japan that never eventuated. Everything else on the island—a top-secret city housing several thousand beleaguered Air Force personnel—was underground out of the weather. The weather in the Bering Sea is the worst in the world.

I checked in with base command and was trundled to a

windowless motel-like room in Visitors' Quarters; ate an inadequate supper in the officers' cafeteria and then went to visit the injured pilot.

He was a chunky Texan with thick short sandy red hair, freckles and an abundance of bandages and plaster casts. His eyes were painfully bloodshot—evidence of concussion.

"Paul Oland," he said. "Afraid I can't shake hands, Mr. Dark. Pull up a pew there."

I sat, not quite fitting on the narrow chair. "How're you making it?"

"They tell me I'll be flying again in a few months, to my surprise. Sheer dumb luck. I should've been dead."

"Tell me about the accident."

"Well, I'd been at 120,000 feet over Kamchatka and I was on my way back with a lot of exposed film. They've recovered all the film, by the way. It's all in the debriefing report."

"I've read it. But I'd like to hear you describe it."

"You know much about the weather patterns up here?"

"I helped set up the U-2 program here."

"Then you know what it's like. Half the time you're in thick fog and hundred-knot winds at the same time. You can't tell up from down. You have to rely on your instruments and if the instruments start to kick around you've had it."

"That's what happened? Instrument failure?"

"They didn't fail. They just weren't a match for the williwaw. I'd made my descent into the muck—I was down to four thousand feet and still dropping. The only way you can see anything around here is get right down on the deck. The pilots who get lost and get killed are the ones who try to climb out of it. There isn't any top on it. It just goes up forever, right clear to the moon. Anyway I was circling in from the west to line up for my landing approach. They

had me on radar and I had my Loran bearings—it should have been fine. But there's an incredible amount of electrical activity in these clouds. My needles were jumping around like they got stung by red ants. I figured that would pass, they'd calm down when I got closer to base and signals got stronger. But then I got a squeal from the tower—I'd gone off their screen behind a mountain on Attu. I figured it had to be the north end of Attu so I pulled hard left and started to climb—I still couldn't see a thing, it was a williwaw blowing out there, and my radar screen was useless because of dozens of false images reflected back from the moisture in the clouds. The next thing I knew I was bellyflopping across Fish Hook Ridge."

"Belly landing?"

"Landing? No. Accident. Ten feet lower and I'd have crashed nose-first into the cliff. Blind luck, I slid across the top of it instead. I was about three miles south of where I'd thought I was—the wind blew me that far off course in something like forty-five seconds while I was off the Shemya radar screen. I mean it's fantastic up here, the elements. This weather goes up and down like a whore's drawers."

"So you hit the top of the ridge——"

"And flipped over and busted most of my bones. The plane came apart but it wasn't too bad. Bits and pieces went in various directions. The canopy saved me—it didn't cave in. God knows why. Most of the dashboard fell apart, though."

"Including the code box."

"Yeah. Including the code box." He looked morose.

* * *

THERE ISN'T a single tree on Attu—or for that matter on any of the Aleutian Islands—but the tundra growth is a matte on everything and makes for difficult boggy walking, especially for someone as heavy as I am.

We'd had to wait thirty-six hours for a break in the weather. Then the helicopter had shuttled me across to the big island and left me there with a sort of Boy Scout camping outfit in my backpack in case the weather didn't permit the cropper's picking me up at sundown—a strong likelihood.

The chopper pilot had done a bit too much plain-English talking into his microphone and I reprimanded him because he'd said enough to alert a sufficiently sharp-eared Soviet radio monitor to the fact that we were searching for something crucial, valuable and portable on Attu. It added a sense of urgency to my job and made me glad of the portable radio in my pack. We weren't far off the Soviet coast, after all. And I was dismally aware of the fact that if the Soviets sent people in to "help" me hunt for the code box, my own people weren't likely to start World War III over it. Langley's attitude is to do your best but take your losses.

I was dropped off within a hundred yards of the crash site but it took me twenty minutes to get there on foot; I had to crab my way up the cliffs. I wondered how the devil the Japanese and American infantries had managed to fight a war here. In 1943 the entrenched Japanese defense force had been annihilated by 15,000 American troops who somehow made amphibious landings on the beaches. The fighting was wild and vicious. Half the U.S. soldiers had been evacuated on stretchers or left buried on the island—combat wounds, frostbite, shock, trenchfoot, williwaw madness.

All those lives had been expended for it and ever since then it had been ignored by the world: nobody needed it; Attu was as useless as any piece of ground on earth. Uninhabited and unloved. Technically it belongs to the United States and officially it is a National Battlefield Park—like, say, Gettysburg; it has an obscenely large

military cemetary. But tourists do not queue up to go there. Nothing exists on the mountainous tundra except mud, grass, brush, snow and the rusting relics of old warfare: abandoned artillery, wrecked planes, discarded canteens, bent M-1 rifles, ruined Japanese caterpillar trucks, crushed infantry steel helmets.

The morning was fairly clear—unusual. I could see down the length of Massacre Valley to the foam of Massacre Bay. These place-names dated back to Soviet sealing days in the 19th century when Aleut Indians had been decimated by Russian sailors; in World War II they were eerily fitting. To the east I saw an Air Force jet lift above the Shemya runway and circle away toward Amchitka, the Atomic Energy Commission's private test-hole island, an hour's flight away over the horizon.

I was alone on Attu with the volcanoes and the tundra—a rare distinction in which I took no pleasure. I removed my backpack, anchored it with boulders in case of a sudden williwaw, and began to prowl.

I was resigned to a long dismal search. If the code box had been in plain sight the Air Force people would have found it. So it had fallen into a crevice or tumbled into a pool of mud or rolled down a cliff.

First a snack—two roast beef sandwiches to keep my strength up. They tasted like styrofoam. Then I unlimbered the portable metal-detector and put my nose to the ground, cursing Myerson in a dreary monotone.

* * *

THE DAY was wasted. The chopper managed to collect me at sundown; I spent another thirty-six hours on Shemya shooting pool and assuaging boredom before the weather broke and allowed me to return to Attu. Resuming the search I spent five hours clambering cautiously over the east side of

the ridge. The metal-detector unearthed dozens of cartridges, rifles, canteens and other souvenirs but no CCT box.

I worked a checkerboard pattern and decided to keep the current sweep inside a seventy-yard radius of the spot where the plane had come apart; my first search, a fifty-yard circle, had proved fruitless. When the seventy-five-yard circle produced nothing I ate lunch and expanded the search area to a hundred-yard radius.

In the afternoon the clouds built up and the wind began to cry across the ridgetops. I went back to my campsite and shouldered into the heavy parka and continued my work muffled in a thick earflapped hat and heavy gloves. I kept one eye on the weather, ready to seek shelter, but it held—the clouds remained a few hundred feet above my 2,000-foot ridge, although I could see snow-squalls offshore that came right down to the water.

At about half past three my search brought me around to the west rim of the ridge. By a fluke the sun broke through at that moment and a painful blade of reflected light stabbed at me from a rubble of volcanic rock two hundred feet below me at the foot of the cliff.

It excited me because rusty relics don't gleam like that. It was the shine of fresh new metal or possibly glass.

* * *

IT WAS a long climb down because I had to go around. A mountain climber might have rappelled down in five minutes but I'm too old and too fat for athletics. I took my time, going down from rock to rock on the rubber soles of my insulated boots, hanging onto a rope I'd anchored to a boulder at the top.

By the time I made my way around to the point where I'd seen the glimmer the sun had long since vanished again. But I found it anyway, knowing where to look, and it was

indeed the Agency's CCT code box—a device similar to an ordinary pocket calculator, full of transistorized printed miniature circuits designed to send and receive messages in codes that were virtually impenetrable by anyone who didn't possess an identical CCT with identically programmed circuitry.

The box was battered and mangled from its fall; unserviceable—but that wouldn't matter to the Russians if they'd got their hands on it. Damaged or not, it would have yielded up its secrets to any examiner of its circuitry. I was relieved to have it in hand.

I contemplated the steep climb back to camp; I made a face. Out of habit and procrastination I turned to survey the horizons—and saw through a notch in the sodden hills a dark silent bulk sliding along the waves, heading out to sea. Even as I watched the submarine its decks began to run awash; it submerged quickly and I might have imagined it except for the motorized rubber dinghy that came birling through the surf onto the strip of volcanic sand that the invaders of thirty-four years ago had code-named Beach Red.

The submarine had come up on the blind side of the island and launched its dinghy and fled immediately. It meant only one thing: they were Russians.

* * *

"I'M SORRY, Mr. Dark. Ain't nothing flying around here except hangars. We've got a class-A williwaw in progress. Wind gauge is gusting to a hundred and fifteen knots. Maybe by morning—"

"Tell the Base C.O. there are strangers on Attu. Possibly Soviets. And a submarine lying off the western beach. You got that?"

"Yes, sir. Acknowledge."

Low sunbeams slanted onto the sea through a distant hole in the overcast. From the rim of the cliff and against the shimmering glare on the ocean I saw the tiny outline of a solitary figure climbing toward me.

I gathered my gear, stowed the CCT in my parka and carried the backpack away down the east face of the ridge toward Massacre Valley. It was slow going in the sucking tundra but I wanted to be well away from the crash site. It was a big island; all I had to do was stay out of sight until I could be picked up.

I secreted the heavy metal-detector under an overhang; I had no further need of it. Then I buckled into the backpack and pressed on.

The light drained out of the sky; the wind came and with it fog. I knew I needed shelter.

The best I could find was a sort of hollow in the rocks. It broke most of the wind. I wrapped up in blankets and dug out an inadequate dinner of sandwiches and bottled vitamin-fruit concentrate. Then I rummaged in the pack for my sole weapon—an airman's lightweight survival carbine. I loaded it and laid it beside me.

The williwaw struck at nightfall and I spent most of the night emphatically miserable in a cringing huddle, clutching the blankets around me with my face buried in cloth and my ears deafened by the cry of the storm.

By the time it eased away, the luminous dial of my watch told me it was only midnight but I was battered and exhausted and dismally cold.

I rooted dry socks out of the pack. My fingers were tingling numb; I had trouble getting the boots off and on. I ate another sandwich and waited for daybreak, thinking about that man I'd seen climbing the ridge. If he found me he wouldn't leave me alive.

My survival through several decades of intelligence capers and Cold War conflicts has been a matter of wits

rather than atavistic toughness. I am a poor marksman and have never bothered to learn anything about unarmed combat or pressure-points or outdoor tricks. I have never been painted into a kill-or-be-killed corner; it's not my fashion. I had never killed anyone or tried to. It is my conceit that any fool can kill people. I fancy myself a bit better than that.

But if a Soviet scout found me...

* * *

"IT'S PEA SOUP up here."

"It's often like that, sir, but if you can make your way down to the beach at the foot of the valley it may be clear down there. We'll try to get a helicopter in after you've reached position. We chased their submarine out past the twenty-mile limit. If they've still got anyone on the island he'll keep—just stay out of his way."

"You can bet on it." I packed the radio and began the slow descent. Fog and light rain swirled about me.

The wind sluiced down the slope behind me, carrying sound. That was how I got my first warning.

He was making noise with his canteens and metal impedimenta and heavy boots. No more noise than I'd been making—but the wind was in my favor: I heard him first.

I wheeled in alarm and saw him bearing down, vague in the mist—a big man made bulkier by his quilted Siberian parka and his festoonings of equipment: moving fast downhill through the fog perhaps fifty yards above me. The object in his fist looked like a machine pistol: wicked, efficient.

When he stopped and lifted it to aim I flung myself behind a boulder and heard the ricochetting bullets shriek over my head.

I crawled madly—infuriated to a white-hot rage: fear saps a man of his dignity and that's a hateful plight.

* * *

"SHEMYA. Charlie Dark calling Shemya. For Pete's sake, come in Shemya."

Nothing: static. I was in a dead-radio pocket.

I caromed off the walls of an overgrown Japanese trench, bouncing off the slippery sides, running as best I could—shambling, really; the mud sucked at my boots. I made random turns in the maze every time I came to a fork. The Japanese had dug miles of trenches.

Finally I stopped and attempted to control my breathing. I'd been making too much racket. Use your head, Charlie—keep your wits because that clown intends to kill you to get his hands on the code box in your pocket.

I moved on, bent low and trying to walk without sound. It was difficult; the boots squished in the muck.

The wind moaned; mist rolled and curled in unpredictable tendrils—one moment I was socked in, blind, and the next I could see blue sky. I kept stopping to listen. At first I heard him banging around up there, running from trench to trench, searching. Then the clamor stopped and I knew he was moving as I was—softly, waiting for me to give myself away.

He was the hunter. It put the burden on him. Realizing that, I knew my best chance was to stop.

The boulder had been too huge to shift so they had curled the trench around it, undercutting its belly. I wouldn't find better cover. I crouched under the overhanging rock and took out the survival carbine, cocked it and waited.

* * *

I THOUGHT of trying the radio again but that was no good. They couldn't help me in the fog—and he might hear my voice.

I heard the suck of bog around his boots.

He was up high on the mountainside somewhere above the trench. The rock above my head prevented me from seeing him—and prevented him from seeing me as well: maybe I had a chance.

He was still searching for me and that meant it was more than mere curiosity. He knew I had the code box; otherwise he'd have been satisfied to run me off the search area. Possibly he'd found the abandoned metal-detector and drawn his conclusions from that; or maybe he'd seen my tracks at the foot of the cliff where I'd recovered the CCT. A man adept at reading tracks could have—

Tracks. The realization grenaded into me. I'd left huge tracks in the muddy trench. Not being an outdoorsman I hadn't even thought of it before.

My tracks led to this spot. They didn't lead away from it.

Too late now to think about sweeping mud over them. All I could do was pray he didn't see my spoor.

But he found it.

* * *

THE TRENCH WALLS were nine or ten feet high. If the Japanese had used ladders they had long since rotted away. The only way to get down was to jump; the only alternative was to travel along the trench to a distant point where the walls were lower.

I listened to him come. He was near the boulder, just above me. He went back and forth a couple of times. I could see what he saw: tracks on one side, no tracks on the other.

I heard the harsh metal clack when he worked the mechanism of the machine pistol.

Then unaccountably his boots moved away.

It took me a moment to understand. Then I realized.

The trench was too wide for him to leap across it. And he couldn't jump down in plain view of me. He was heading along the trench to jump into it beyond the bend and come at me carefully on a level.

While I listened to his footsteps recede I knew I couldn't stay here. Some primitive impulse drove me out of my shelter—back the way I'd come, sliding my feet into the tracks I'd already made.

I approached the bend and stopped, my back to the wall, searching the rim above me. Then I heard him again—he was past the bend; something clanked.

I slid along the wall, coating the parka with muck. I was in time to see him jump right down into my view.

* * *

THE MUCK betrayed him. His feet slid out from under him and he sprawled. The machine pistol slid out of his hand into the mud, jamming itself muzzle-first with the handle protruding at an angle.

I took a pace toward him and spoke in Russian: "Be still."

He froze. His face came around—a big flat Mongol face, the face of a Siberian Tatar Cossack.

I trained the carbine on him. "Take it easy, Tovarich." But my heart pounded. His face was preternatural, terrifying. His dark eyes burned at me. Then they flicked toward the machine pistol just beyond the reach of his long powerful arms.

Sure, I thought. They'd picked a Mongol for the job because they wanted someone expendable and someone expert at outdoor maneuver—a man who could read the earth like an Apache and find an object that American eyes had missed. An animalistic soldier who could move across an enemy island without being trapped by the enemy.

In short he was formidable. Primitve but clever; simple but expert—a fighter, a survivor, a killer.

All this I understood with one look at him. And something else:

He wasn't programmed to surrender.

* * *

He came to his feet with slow menacing care. He kept looking from me to the machine pistol and back. Judging his chances. His eyes lingered a moment on my survival carbine. It was a high-velocity .22, very small and light. He was thinking he could absorb one or two of those and still live to kill me.

He wasn't a technological sophisticate. There was something I knew that he didn't know. I had an edge that had nothing to do with the gun in my hands. But just the same I faced a terrible dilemma.

I said in English, "I won't kill you in cold blood. It's not my style."

I could see by the slight squint of his eyes that he didn't understand my English. I went on, talking in a calm voice as you might talk to a skittish animal to calm it. "I can't just walk away. You'd come after me. I can't tie you up—if I get that close to you, you'll find some way to get the better of me. I can try to take you down to the beach at gunpoint but that doesn't have much appeal either. In this fog? You'd have too many chances to escape or jump me. Look, I want to get out of this alive."

He only stood there, facing me, adamant.

I said in Russian, "Don't try to reach the gun."

He made no reply but from the flash of his eyes I knew he'd understood that. Stubborn, willful, he watched me with singleminded intensity.

I said reasonable, "You might kill me and get the box.

But you can't get off the island. We've driven your submarine away. You're stranded here. Your only choice is to go back with me. I won't hurt you if you don't force it."

With one hand I held the gun on him; with the other I wormed the radio out of its bag. I spoke into the mouthpiece in English:

"Shemya, this is Charlie Dark. I doubt you can hear me. But if you can, send a squad over here to help me out. I've got my hands full with a Mongolian Tatar who wants my guts for lunch." I waited for a reply, got none, switched it off and fumbled to put it away.

He was motionless; his very stillness was menacing. His quick determined mind was racing visibly and I knew I'd never get him to the beach.

I spoke to him in English. "It's splitting hairs and I'm going to hate myself for a hypocrite but I don't see any other way to do this. You're too healthy for me to contend with."

He didn't even blink.

I switched to Russian, defrauding him: "We're going to walk down to the valley to the beach. You first."

Then I turned my head as if to locate something in my pack.

It was the break he'd waited for. He pounced on the machine pistol, willing to take his chances, figuring he could survive my first shot or two, figuring my reaction time would be slow—an old fat soft American.

The weapon rode up in his grasp and in that broken instant of time I wondered if I'd guessed wrong. But it didn't matter now. I didn't bother to try to lift my carbine; it would have been a useless gesture. I saw the grim stubborn satisfaction in his eyes; a trace of puzzlement flicked across him but he was already committed: he pulled the trigger.

* * *

THE EXPLOSION rang in my ears. Pieces of heavy steel whacked into the walls of the trench. The Mongol wheeled back with a wail, blood streaming from his right hand in a gout. He sank to his knees and folded himself protectively over the shattered hand, grunting his agony.

I found the first-aid kit in my pack and tossed it to him. "Here. Bind it. We've got a long hike ahead of us."

And hike we did. He was docile enough now; the injury had blown the fight out of him.

The chopper collected us at noon on Massacre Beach.

* * *

THE BASE COMMANDER drove me to the plane. When I got out of the car we shook hands. He said, "Thanks for bringing him in alive. We'll milk him for every drop. But I still don't understand how you brought it off."

"I guess I didn't play fair with him. I could have told him not to try to shoot that machine pistol. You can't fire a weapon that's got mud jammed up its muzzle. It won't shoot—it'll only explode."

* * *

Charlie's Dodge

STREAKS OF FALLING GREY RAIN slanted across the silhouette of Sydney Harbor Bridge and when the taxi decanted me under the shelter of the porte-cochere canopy my poplin suit was still steamy from the dash at the airport. I carried my traveling bag inside the high-rise, found my way to the lifts and rode it up to the ninth floor.

The door had frosted glass and a legend: *Australamerica Travel & Shipping Agency Ltd.—New York, Los Angeles, Sydney.*

The girl at the reception desk sent me down a sterile hall. I could hear typewriters and Telexes in the warren of partitioned cubicles.

The conference room had wraparound plate glass; it was a corner suite. The view of the stormy city was striking.

Two men awaited me. The ash tray was a litter of butts and the styrofoam coffee cups had nothing left in them but smeared brown stains. Young Leonard Ross hurried like an officious bellboy to relieve me of the B-4 bag. "I hope you've got a spare suit in here. You're drenched. How was the flight? Bill, I guess you know Charlie Dark?"

"Only by reputation." The tall man came sinuously to shake my hand. "Good to meet you, Charlie. I'm Bill Jaeger, chief-of-station down here."

When the amenities were out of the way and we'd sent out for sandwiches I settled my amplitude into a wooden

armchair at the table. It was a bit of a squeeze. "Now what's the flap?"

Ross said, "Didn't Myerson brief you?"

"No."

"That figures," Jaeger said. "I may be stepping out of line but it baffles me how Myerson keeps his job."

I let it lie. It wouldn't have been useful to explain to Jaeger that Myerson keeps his job only because of me. Either Jaeger would refuse to believe it or he'd resent my conceit.

"The flap," Ross said, "goes by the names of Myra Hilley and Iwan Stenback. They purport to be journalists."

Jaeger made a face. "Underground press. They're tearing our station to pieces."

"Systematically," Ross said. "Causing a great deal of embarrassment for both the Australians and us." Then a wan smile: "You and I were sent in to get rid of them for Bill. Actually that's not quite accurate. You were sent to get rid of them. I was sent to hold your coat." With his collegiate good looks Ross was the picture of earnest innocence but I'd known him a while—sometimes he was astonishingly naïve but he was brighter than he seemed: a quick study. One day he'd be in charge of a department.

A girl brought us a tray of sandwiches and rattled something at Jaeger in 'Stryne—I didn't get but one word in four; the accent was more impenetrable than Cockney. Jaeger said, "I'll have to call them back later." The girl smiled, nodded, departed, legs swishing; Ross's eyes followed her until she was gone.

Jaeger was one of those lanky Gary Cooperish people who seem to have flexible bones rather than joints. I knew him as he knew me: by reputation. Easygoing but efficient—a good station chief, reliable, but not the sort you'd want running a vital station in a danger zone. He was a good

diplomat and knew how to avoid ruffling feathers; he was the kind of executive you assigned to a friendly country rather than a potential enemy.

He said, "Iwan Stenback publishes a weekly rag called *Sydney Exposed.* Part soft-core porn, part yellow gossip and cheap scandal, part health food recipes and diagrams for Yoga positions, part radical-left editorializing. Until recently it didn't have much of a circulation—mostly just freaks. Very youth-oriented. Always just skirting the libel and obscenity laws. Then a couple of months ago Stenback hired a hot new reporter by the name of Myra Hilley. Since then the circulation's shot up like a Titan missile because the rag announced in a page-one box under Hilley's by-line that they were going to start naming and identifying American CIA spies who were working undercover in Australia."

Ross said, "It's happened before, of course. In Greece that time, and —"

I cut him off. "Have they made good on the threat?"

Jaeger said in his dry way, "So far they've named seven of our people."

"Accurately?"

"Yes."

I decided I liked him. He didn't make apologies; he didn't waffle. He looked like a cowboy and talked with a prairie twang but I suspected there was nothing wrong with his brain.

I said, "Where's they get the names?"

"We think one or two of our people may have been indiscreet. They aren't all paragons, the people we buy information from. And in a country like this they're not scared into secrecy—they don't need to worry about jackboots in the hall at midnight, do they. In some ways it's harder to run a secure intelligence network in a free country that it is in a dictatorship."

"You've made efforts to plug the leaks?"

"Yes, sure. I think I know how it may have happened. I'm told Myra Hilley's attractive—seductive as hell."

"You've never seen her?"

"No. Not many people have, evidently. I'm sure she goes under a variety of cover identities. After all, if her face were known people wouldn't talk to her."

"Is 'Myra Hilley' a pen name?"

"No." Jaeger deferred to Ross.

"Born in Australia but schooled in England and Switzerland." Ross was reading from his notebook. "Myra Elizabeth Hilley's her real name. She's twenty-seven. The Berne file suggests she may have had contact with members of the Baader-Meinhof gang. In any case she returned to Australia a year ago with a head full of radical revolutionary anti-capitalist theory."

Jaeger said, "Typical immature anti-establishment anti-American notions. Australia already has a socialist government but that doesn't seem to satisfy these idiots. They want blood. Preferably blue. It doesn't seem to penetrate their thick heads that this capitalist free enterprise system they hate so much has graduated more people out of poverty than any other system in history."

"Still," I said, wanting to get him off his political stump, "for an idiot she seems to have done a capable professional espionage job against us."

"Every week," Ross said, "the name of another of our agents appears in *Sydney Exposed*. They promise to keep doing it until they've named every last American spy in Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea."

"Can they make good on the threat?"

Jaeger smiled. "We don't know. But they've done it so far."

Ross said, "We're working with the Australians on this

—they don't like it any better than we do. It embarrasses them as much as it does us. After all, the Australian government knows we're here. But they can't be seen to infringe the freedom of the press, and obviously Washington can't be seen to bully the press of an independent nation. It's got to be handled in such a way that it doesn't look like official repression. That's why you're here, Charlie. To think of something clever."

"At least Myerson hasn't lost faith in my ability to work miracles," I remarked. I brooded at Ross, then at Jaeger. They seemed to be waiting for me to provide an instantaneous solution to their difficulty. "My problem," I confessed, "is a deep-down fanaticism in behalf of absolute freedom of the press. Wherever censorship begins, that's where tyranny begins."

"I agree," said Jaeger, "but the Australian press tends to be a bit lurid anyway, and this particular rag goes far beyond the limiits of responsible journalism."

That was putting it diplomatically. The real issue was the fact that *Sydney Exposed* was blowing the covers off our agents. When you expose an agent you render him inoperable. The newspaper was systematically closing down our network. Given the premise that the survival of nations depends on the accuracy of their intelligence, we had no choice but to stop publication of these revelations. Yet I could not bring myself to think in terms of strong-arm methods. There has to be a difference between the good guys and the bad guys.

I said, "Has anyone tried to reason with them?"

Jaeger said, "I had a talk with Stenback. He listened politely and laughed in my face."

"Tell me about him."

"Sort of a guru type. Brown scraggly beard shot with grey. Wears his hair in a ponytail. Ross has the official details."

Ross turned a page in his notebook. "Thirty-four years old. Born in Sweden. Was a lieutenant in the Swedish army—a crack shot, by the way. Immigrated here five years ago. Naturalized Australian citizen. Background reports indicate he used to hang out with American Vietnam draft-dodgers in Sweden. Earlier, his father was a quisling in Norway during the War, which may explain why Stenback grew up with a chip on his shoulder. Before he came down here he worked a while as a leg man on a few of the cheap London tabloids, publishing cheap filthy innuendos about prominent Members of Parliament and the like. Digging up dirt seems to be his mission in life—the worse it smells the better he likes it."

Ross closed the notebook. "Myerson would prefer it if you arranged a fatal accident for them, Charlie."

"I don't much care what he prefers. I don't kill people, Ross, it's not my style. Any fool can kill people."

"Maybe this time you haven't got a choice. How else can you stop them publishing this stuff?"

* * *

WE SAT in a four-door Humber across the street from the shopfront office of *Sydney Exposed*. It was a shabby old part of the city—cheap flats, a boarded-up cinema, rubbish in the gutters. In the newspaper's windows the lights burned late—tomorrow was this week's publication day and Stenback was in there with his staff composing the late pages. "She never comes to the office personally?"

"Apparently not," Ross said. "We've had it staked out for ten days. If she's set foot in the place we're not aware of it. Of course we're not sure what she looks like. The last available photograph is from nine years ago when she was eighteen. Blonde hair, gorgeous face and figure—the beach beauty type. You know these athletic Australian

girls. But who knows. Maybe she's gained weight, changed her hair, whatever. She could be any one of a dozen women who've wandered in and out of there."

I said, "Assuming she doesn't report in person to the office, it follows she must send her copy in. Not by the post; I think she'd be too paranoid to entrust her copy to government mails. Her articles would be hand delivered."

"Ross began to smile. "Then—"

"It'll take man-hours and leg work but let's try to put surveillance on anyone who brings an envelope into this office."

* * *

THROUGH THE wraparound corner windows the sky was cheerful but Jaeger was glum. "Our security's all right—I'm pretty sure we've plugged all possible leaks. But it's a case of locking the barn door after the horse thieves have made their getaway. Probably they've got all the names already—they're publishing one or two a week, holding back to keep the circulation up. It's like a week-to-week cliffhanger serial. Every week the public clamor grows—they're starting to call for blood in Adelaide and Melbourne. Our blood. If it keeps up we'll all find ourselves deported. It'll be done with man-to-man shrugs and smiles and abject apologies but they'll do it all the same—they'll have no option if the public pressure grows bad enough. You'll have to move fast, Charlie."

"I'm ready to," I said. "We've found Myra Hilley."

* * *

SHE was clever but all the same she was an amateur and it hadn't occurred to her that a cutout and blind drop setup can be breached. For a week we had backtracked all the messengers who had delivered envelopes to *Sydney*

Exposed. We doubted she would use a formal messenger service; we were right.

The drop was mundane but adequate: a left-luggage locker in a railway station. But the thing about lockers is that you have to transfer the locker key from hand to hand. Once we knew the system we broke it easily. Hilley would leave the envelope in the station locker and put the key in an envelope and leave it with the landlord of a pub she frequented near the waterfront. The kid—a bearded long-haired boy in frayed denims and a patchwork jacket—would collect the key from the bar, go to the locker, retrieve the envelope and carry it by hand to *Sydney Exposed.* The kid, like five others who made deliveries regularly to the newspaper, was shadowed for a week and when he collected the key and opened the locker we knew we were onto Myra Hilley: we simply staked out the lockers until she arrived to deposit the next week's copy.

She lived in a small flat on a suburban street near a shopping center. As it turned out she hadn't resorted to any disguise. She was still blonde and gorgeous with a leggy showgirl look. Three nights in a row she emerged in evening dress, drove her white MG into the heart of Sydney and rendezvoused with a man: each night a different man, each night a different posh waterhole. Each night she and the man—two politicians, one diplomat—would repair afterward to a luxury hotel.

Ross laughed. "So that's how she meets so many prominent guys. She's a call girl!"

* * *

We requisitioned revolvers and special-effects equipment from Jaeger's station. We were leaving when Jaeger met us in the corridor. He glanced at the revolvers as we fed them into our attaché cases. "Then you're going to kill them after all."

"Nobody gets killed on a Charlie Dark caper," I told him.

"You want any help? I can give you a back-up squad."

"Let's keep it quiet," I replied.

Ross said cheerily, "We'll handle it, Bill."

He was still dubious when we left.

* * *

WHEN SHE answered the door I pushed the gun up under her nose and she backed away in alarm. I stepped inside and closed the door. "Stay loose, birdie. No screams, all right?"

A veil slid across her eyes. Contempt began to mix with fear. "What do you want?"

"Sit down and don't talk. We're waiting for somebody."

"Who are you?"

"Does it matter?"

"You're an American."

"Really? I thought I was doing a fair 'Stryne accent there."

She managed a snort of contemptuous laughter. She wore a white jumpsuit with a yellow scarf at the neck—crisp, very smart. She had a tan complexion as soft and smooth as Japanese silk; she'd have inspired desire even in a jaded centerfold photographer. I had no trouble with the notion that she would be able to extract information from men.

"Come on," she said impatiently, "what *is* this?"

"Sit down." I wiggled the gun. "It's only a .32 but they're hollowpoint bullets—they make a terrible mess of flesh and bone."

Making a face she took a seat on the divan and tucked her long legs under her. I crossed the room to close the drapes. It was a comfortable efficiency flat, not terribly

big, the furniture a bit Bohemian: an old door on bricks served as a coffee talbe and the divan was one of those pull-out convertible beds. Apparently she spent most of her money on clothes.

"I suppose if I sit here long enough you'll tell me what this is about?"

"Count on it, Myra."

"You're the CIA, aren't you. Which one? Cole? Ludlow? Fortescue?"

"What's in a name?" I sat down and rested the revolver on my knee. "Be patient, Myra."

With enviable aplomb she rested her head against the wall and closed her eyes, feigning boredom. A very tough sullen young lady. I hoped we could crack her. It wouldn't be easy.

* * *

Ross BROUGHT Iwan Stenback into the flat at gunpoint. The Swede was a short man with a beard and long hair tied back with a rubber band. His pale eyes took in the scene quickly. "So. The CIA brings us together to murder us. I suppose you'll give it the appearance of a lovers' quarrel. Do you honestly think anyone will believe such a crude sham?"

"We like to think we're a bit more sophisticated than that," I said. "Sit down, Stenback."

He moved to stand beside Myra Hilley. She touched his hand possessively and not without fear. I flicked the gun in his direction and he eased past the arm of the couch and sat down next to Myra Hilley. He wasn't a bad looking man. There was a jaded professorial cynicism about him—the kind of *weltschmertz* that sometimes appeals to women: they see immediately through the bitter veneer and convince themselves that beneath it is a sensitive being who needs coddling and protecting.

I said, "We need to have a little talk."

Ross snarled. "What do you want to talk for? Let's get it over with." He cocked his revolver. It made a nasty sound in the room.

"Patience," I told him. To Stenback I said, "My associate favors brute force but I suspect we'd all prefer to avoid that."

It was the old two-cop dodge: the good cop offers you a cigarette, the bad cop slaps it out of your mouth. After a while you begin to look upon the good cop not as your jailer but as your friend.

I sat down facing them and placed my revolver on the tabletop in front of me to free my hands so that I could take out my wallet and flash it at them. "My name is Charles Dark. I'm a security officer with the United States Government."

I heard Ross's melodramatic sigh of exasperation.

Stenback wasn't falling for it. "You've got no jurisdiction here," he said coolly.

Myra Hilley leaned forward to read my ID laminate. "Charles Dark. A new name for our list, Iwan." She favored me with an icy smile.

I returned it in kind. "Now that you've demonstrated your fearlessness shall we get down to business?"

Stenback yawned. "What business?"

"You're an entrepreneur," I said. "You publish at a profit. Suppose we sweeten it?"

They looked at each other with cynical amusement. It was clear there was an attachment between them—a strong sexual bond. He was one of those flagellants who prefer shopworn goods.

I said, "For every week's issue in which you refrain from publishing names of American agents, a payment of ten thousand dollars."

"Australian dollars?"

"American if you prefer."

The woman laughed. "They think they can buy anyone off. Isn't it just like them?"

I said, "How about it, Stenback?"

"I'm glad to know how much Judas money you're willing to offer me. Of course my answer is no. Did you think I'd be that easy to bribe? I can't compromise the people's right to know."

"Good for you," Ross said. "That's all we wanted to know, ain't it, Charlie. Let's get it done."

Myra Hilley reached for Stenback's hand.

Ross spoke again, the petulant snarl increasing. "I told you it'd be a waste of time, Charlie."

"In conscience," I said wearily, "we had to offer them the option." I stood up and went over to the side of the room to get out of the line of fire; I put my back to the wall and shoved my hands in my pockets. "You can change your minds, of course. My associate—well I'm afraid he enjoys rough-and-tumble. Regrettable but there you are. We're forced by people like you to employ people like him. Actually I detest the young oaf. I'd hoped to one-up him by denying him his pleasure."

Ross turned angrily toward me. His revolver rode around in my direction. "You fat old bastard. I've had all I can take of your sanctimonious—"

It was the distraction Stenback must have been praying for. He pounced on the .32 revolver that I had left lying on the table; in an instant it was in his fist and roaring.

In that confined space the blasts were earsplitting. My jaw went agape. Deafened, I saw Ross spin wildly around and slam against the wall. The gun dropped from his fingers. He clutched at the wall and slid down, leaving a wet red smear against the plaster. His shoes drummed

the floor and reflex made him curl up, foetal; then he went still.

* * *

MY HAND belatedly whipped out of my pocket with the flat automatic pistol I'd concealed there. I leveled it at Stenback's profile. "Drop it. Now!"

He hesitated. His revolver was still aimed at Ross, who lay in an untidy heap. The woman sat wide-eyed, motionless.

I spoke quickly. "I won't kill you unless you force me to defend myself."

It wasn't so much that he believed me; it was that I had the drop on him. By the time he could turn his gun through the ninety-degree arc toward me I could put two or three into him. He'd been a soldier; he knew that.

Slowly he lowered his arm to his side and let the revolver drop to the carpet.

"Smart," I observed. "Kick it to me."

When he complied I got down on one knee and picked up the .32 carefully by inserting my ballpoint pen into its muzzle. When I stood up I flapped the automatic toward him. "Sit down, sit back, relax."

He sank onto the divan and leaned back warily. I dropped the .32 into my jacket pocket and sidled around toward Ross, keeping my automatic trained on Stenback and Myra Hilley; knelt by Ross and laid my fingers along his throat to test for a pulse. There was a good deal of blood. I removed my hand and stood, grunting with the effort. "He's dead."

"Self-defense," Stenback snapped.

"Sure." I gave him a crooked smile. "Who's going to believe that?"

I saw realization grenade into Myra Hilley. She clutched his arm in fear.

I looked down at Ross. "Everybody knows you two had it in for the CIA. Now you've murdered a CIA agent. Man, you'll be a hundred and five before they let you out into the light of day again. Both of you," I added, looking up sharply at the woman. "It's felony murder—she's as guilty as you are. And I'll testify to that." Then I gave it a slow chilly smile. "Come to think of it you've done me a couple of favors. I never could stand the punk. I'm glad you've taken him out—they'll never stick me with him again. And you've done my job for me. The assignment was to stop you from publishing the rest of those names. You can't publish in a prison cell."

Myra Hilley sat up straight. "But we can still talk. We can talk in court and we can talk to our lawyers and they can talk to the press. We can still make those names public. Then what happens to you, superspy? It's a black mark on your record, isn't it."

I regarded her with suspicion. "Maybe you're right. Maybe the punk had a point. Maybe I've got no choice." I lifted the automatic.

"Wait." She stared at me.

Stenback seemed mesmerized by Ross's huddled body. Then he looked up at me, at my pistol.

Myra Hilley gripped his hand tighter. He didn't pull away. He seemed to have shrunk; it was the woman's strength that supported both of them.

She said, "You wanted to make a deal with us. All right—we'll take the deal."

"Don't make me laugh, Myra. With the evidence I've got now? I've got Stenback's fingerprints on the murder weapon. Not to mention my own testimony."

"But you still can't stop us from revealing the names of your agents. Only Iwan and I can do that."

I contrived an indifferent expression. I picked up Ross's

unused revolver and dropped it in my pocket for safekeeping; it balanced the weight of the .32 in the other pocket. Then I went toward the phone, the guns dragging my jacket down.

She watched me pick up the receiver before she spoke. "Wait a minute."

"For what?"

"Let us go. We'll leave the country. You'll never hear from us again. We'll never publish those names."

"How do I know that, lady?"

"If we ever reveal the names," she said shrewdly, "you'll find us. Nobody can hide from you people. You'll find us and kill us, or you'll have us extradited and brought back to Australia to stand trial for murdering that man."

I still had the phone in my hand. The dial tone buzzed at me. "It's not my habit to trust your kind."

Stenback said, "She's right, Dark." He seemed to have found his spine. "It's the only chance you've got of keeping those names secret. We're offering you the only way out. For you and for us. You let us go – we save our lives, or at least our freedom, and you get what you want. The paper stops publication."

I spent a while thinking about it. Finally I put the phone down on its cradle. I squinted dubiously at the two of them.

I saw it when the silence began to rag their nerves. I let it grate for a bit. Then abruptly I said, "All right. Get out. I'll give you six hours to get out of Australia before I report his death. We'll keep the murder weapon out of it unless you double-cross me – in which case I'll manage to 'find' it damn quick. You keep that in mind."

"Yeah," she said.

"We will," he said.

"Get out fast now – before I change my mind."

They fled. They looked as if they were holding their breath. I left the door open until I heard them enter the lift. Then I shut it and locked it, glanced down at Ross's bloody body and went across to the window; I parted the drapes and watched Stenback and Myra Hilley emerge from the canopy below me. They got into her white MG and I watched it squeal away.

Then I let the drapes fall to. Turning around, I said, "They're gone."

Ross grunted and got to his feet.

* * *

LOOKING DOWN at himself he grumbled, "Do these phony blood capsules wash out? If not I've just ruined a good suit. Good grief, but I'm cramped. Couldn't you have done it faster? I think I bruised a rib when I fell. Incidentally I didn't take kindly to you calling me 'punk' and 'oaf' and all that stuff."

"Are you about out of complaints now?"

He grinned at me. He was an awful sight. "Why, Charlie, I've barely started."

"Look at it this way, Ross. You've got something to tell your grandchildren about. You've just assisted Charlie Dark in pulling a brand new twist on the oldest con-game in the world—the blank-cartridge badger game. Now doesn't that just fill your heart with pride and admiration?"

"I believe you are by all odds the most infuriatingly smug conceited arrogant fat old man I've ever met," he said, "and I thank you for the privilege of allowing me to work with you."

* * *

Passport for Charlie

MYERSON LIVES FOR THE DAY I fall down on the job. I suppose he thinks it will prove I'm no better than he is after all. He keeps throwing impossible jobs my way; the only way I can get revenge is to bring them off and show him up. One of these days I will come a cropper—or I'll bring off a feat so incredible it will blow all his fuses. That's the nature of the tug-of-war between us.

Myerson said, "The van was hijacked between the printer's and the Atlanta office. The Bureau traced the shipment to Miami. A day too late."

"How many?" I asked.

"Four thousand. Genuine U.S. passport blanks."

"Uh-huh. Worth a bloody fortune on the illegal market," I boserved.

"Not if you recover them. That's your job. I don't think you can do it—I don't think anybody can—but it's in your ample lap." He blew smoke from his noxious Havana toward my face and favored me with his barracuda smile. "Bon voyage, Charlie. Don't come back without the passports."

* * *

THE FBI Agent didn't resent the imposition; he was relieved to pass the buck and said as much—he was convinced the shipment had left his jurisdiction and that was fine with him; the headache was ours now.

"It was organized. They weren't two-cent stickup men. Two or three private cars were used to bring the passports to an assembly point here in Coral Gables. We nailed one of the hijackers, you know—blind luck but we've got him and he's willing to testify. A deal for a light sentence provided we give him protection. The Bureau's taken it to the Justice Department and I'm pretty sure they'll agree to it. Trouble is, he doesn't know enough to help you."

"I'll talk to him anyway if you don't mind."

* * *

HIS NAME was Julio Torres and he was a sad man—a Cuban, down on his luck. He was heavy, nearly as fat as I am but not so tall. I guessed his age at forty-five. He had a black mustache and calloused hands. In the interrogation cell we both overlapped our wooden chair seats.

"Who recruited you for the robbery?"

"He calls himself Obregon. I never heard his first name."

"Cuban?"

"No. I think Puerto Rican."

"What was your job?"

"To follow the van and drug the crew."

"How?"

"They stopped for lunch in a truckers' café. I followed them in and put something in their coffee."

"Chloral hydrate?"

"I don't know. Obregon gave it to me and told me to put it in the coffee." He gave me a wry look. "I'm not a pharmacist, you know."

"Then?"

"Then I drove the car. When we saw the van pull over we waited a few minutes to make sure they were asleep; and then Obregon drilled into the van and one of the others got behind the wheel and started it up, and we convoyed it to the hiding place at the farm."

"Whose farm was it?"

"I don't know. Some sharecropper. I think it must have been abandoned for years. The driveway was all overgrown. Anyway I followed the van in my car and Obregon drove another car and there was a third guy in a third car. We transferred the cartons to the trunks of our three cars and drove away separately."

"So that if one of you were caught, it would only cost one-third of the shipment."

"I guess that was the idea, yes. I delivered my car in Coral Gables last night."

"To where?"

"A private house a couple blocks off the Tamiami Trail. I gave the FBI people the address, they already checked it out. I don't think they found anything. It was just a drop, you know, I guess Obregon or one of the other guys picked up the car from there. I left the keys under the mat and walked away after I collected my money, which was in the mailbox like they said it would be. Then the next day I was arrested because one of the van drivers saw me on the street and recognized me from the truckers' café—see, I tripped against one of the drivers in the café and spilled a little root beer on him, that was how I distracted them when I dumped the drug in their coffee, so the guy noticed me then and he recognized me the next day. An unbelievable stroke of bad luck, you know, but that's been my life. But I guess you don't want the story of my life, do you."

"Who does Obregon work for?"

"I have no idea."

"Describe him."

"Well, he's thin, let's see, sort of bald, no chin. Thirty, maybe thirty-five. A mustache—not bushy like mine, a thin neat mustache. He looks like an Indio."

"Did he speak to you in English?"

"Spanish. His English is poor."

"Puerto Rican accent?"

"Yes. I think he must live over there. Something he said, I can't remember what it was, it made me think he only came over to the mainland for this job."

* * *

I CHECKED into the Condado Beach in a rainstorm and had a big meal in the Sheraton's Penthouse restaurant with a lovely view of the sprawled urban lights of San Juan. From twenty stories high at night you don't see the poverty.

In the morning I went through the ancient walls into Old San Juan down to the harborfront Federal Building and met for half an hour with FBI and customs men after which we trooped over to police headquarters and I went through mug files with the help of a San Juan detective lieutenant. We turned up a sheet on a man named Jorge Ruiz Orozco, a/k/a José Raoul Obregon, a/k/a Juan R. Ortiz, so forth; his picture met the description I'd had from Julio Torres in Miami and his rap sheet seemed to fit: he'd been arrested several times for smuggling and receiving stolen goods and had taken two falls in prison, once in Florida and once in Mexico.

We sent a bulletin out via the Burea and Interpol and the Agency. There had been no public announcement of the Torres arrest and there was a chance Orozco-Obregon-Ortiz might not have gone to ground; if he felt he was safe he might be out in public somewhere. The Puerto Rican police had copies of his mug shot in their cars but when he turned up four days later it was over in Charlotte Amalie and I went there to visit his cell before they extradited him to Florida.

He was sullen and not very talkative. I had to make a

few threats. We can be testy about that sort of thing because the Agency doesn't concern itself with courts and appeals; I didn't care if they convicted him or not—I wanted information from him. He had a sister in Ponce and a brother in Mayaguez and an elderly mother in San Juan. I mentioned a few things that might start happening to them: the sister could lose her driver's license, the brother could lose his taxicab in an accident, the aged mother could learn that her social security payments and Medicare were being discontinued because of irregularities in her records—a thousand little harassments like that. After a while Obregon gave me a name.

* * *

FROM St. Thomas I flew back to San Juan on a twin-engine Islander and made the connecting flight to Washington with an hour to spare—time to eat a fair meal between planes. I was in Myerson's office by half past four.

I said, "Obregon was hired for the job by Parker Dortmunder."

Myerson blew Havana smoke at me. "Obregon actually gave you Dortmunder's name?"

"No. Dortmunder wouldn't be that stupid. Obregon gave me a description and a name. The name's one of the aliases Bertine has used before and the description fits Bertine. Bertine works for Dortmunder, or did last time I heard. I think if we find Dortmunder we find the passport blanks."

"Find Bertine," Myerson said. "Leave Dortmunder alone, Charlie."

"Why?"

He shook his head. "Need-to-know."

I was a little angry. "Bertine's just a gopher. Look, Dortmunder doesn't paint himself into corners. He's a

broker, not an inventory dealer—he doesn't steal things on spec. He wouldn't have run this caper if he didn't have a prearranged buyer for the passports. They were stolen to order. Now the fastest way to find them is to pull him in and find out who he sold them to."

"I'm sorry, Charlie. We're using Dortmunder at the moment. We need him." He jabbed the cigar toward me. "Don't touch him. Find the passports but don't annoy Dortmunder."

"If I nail Bertine does that come under the heading of annoying Dortmunder?"

"Yes. You can shadow him but don't touch him."

"Tell me, how many more obstacles do you intend to toss in front of me?"

"Just get the passports back, Charlie." I think it was his grin that infuriated me to the point where I resolved to do it—just to show him up.

* * *

DORTMUNDER WAS a free-lance espionage middleman; he bought and sold secrets as well as international arms and various clandestine goods like bullion, slaves and narcotics. His stomping ground was the Mediterranean. Despite my anger I could understand Myerson's point; Dortmunder was a pill but he was a useful one. He sold information to us that we wouldn't otherwise get. Therefore we tolerated him and let him run. Such is the cynicism of the trade; such is the mechanism by which the Dortmunders survive. All his customers have a vested interest in his survival.

I didn't care about Dortmunder one way or the other but Myerson's stricture made the job much harder than it had to be—that was what annoyed me. It would have been a simpler matter to harass Dortmunder into selling out the passport buyer to us; it wouldn't have hurt Dortmunder

to do so but Myerson didn't want to ruffle his feathers so I had to do it the hard way.

I ran a trace on Bertine and the computers sent me to a forty-two foot diesel cabin cruiser the registry of which drew me along a course from San Juan to Tortola to St. Maarten to Nassau. She was tied up in a marina in the Bahamas when I arrived there and I disassembled her bewildered captain in a hotel room on Paradise Island with the help of two Agency stringers.

The captain was a hired charter operator who ran the Matthews boat for a Swiss company that belonged to Gerard Bertine. After a few hours' defiance and ridicule he eventually saw the light and admitted the cartons of "ledgers" had been collected from him out at sea: a refurbished PBY Catalina flying boat had landed on the water and the transfer of cargo had been made by dinghy. Bertine had gone aboard the airplane with the cargo. A neat dodge, professional—it had the Dortmunder stamp. All this had taken place about 200 miles due east of Nassau four days ago.

Back to the computers. I dug up the registries of half a dozen boats and freighters that tied in with Dortmunder in one way or another. During that time-frame in question one of the boats had been in the Atlantic about halfway from Trinidad to Casablanca; another was a half day out of the Azores; and a third was off the Canaries. It suggested a possibility: midocean refueling for the flying boat. At low cruise a PBY has a range of nearly 2,000 miles. Plotting a course from ship to ship I found that it pointed toward the mouth of the Mediterranean. It persuaded me that the passports were somewhere between Gibraltar and Istanbul.

That was a bit of a help; it was a start. It still left a lot of ground to cover. A PBY can land anywhere on the open water; the passports could have been transferred to a

fishing boat off any port in the Med—no customs inspections.

But I thought I knew where they'd gone.

Algiers is where the runaways go. Fugitives from politics and justice are drawn there because of a governmental no-questions-asked attitude. But it's a drab bureaucratic place with little romance or comfort; if you're not rich it's oppressive. After a while the exiles begin to hate it. The place becomes their prison. That's when they begin to inquire into sources of false passports. The trade in high-priced documents is brisk in Algiers.

Four thousand genuine U.S. passport blanks would be worth more than two million dollars on that market.

* * *

THE STATION STRINGER in Algiers was a passed-over veteran named Atherton who had no image left to polish. He was contentedly serving out his last hitch before retirement.

In Atherton's travel-agency office I went through the station's files of known dealers in black-market documentation. After several hours of it Atherton gave me a bleak look. "Is this getting us anywhere, Charlie? There's just too damned many of them."

"We can rule out the small ones. Whoever bought the shipment had to put up cash. Probably half a million dollars or more. It's got to be a big dealer."

"That still leaves a dozen names or more. You want to pin the list on the wall and throw a dart at it?" He made a face and pushed the files aside. "It won't work. Hell, we'd do as well to canvass the fishing docks. The shipment had to come into Algeria somewhere—if it's here at all. It could just as easily be in Marseilles or Alexandria or—"

"If I don't tumble the goods here I'll go to Marseilles next and then Alexandria and then etcetera. But my nose tells me it's here. The odds are on Algiers."

"If I had four thousand blanks to sell I'd bring 'em here," he agreed. "But it would require an impossible amount of legwork to find them in this maze. The population of dealers is too big, Charlie. We haven't got a hundred investigators on this staff."

"What about Bertine? Has the trace come up with anything?"

"Bertine flew out of Gibraltar two days ago. By now he's in Zurich."

"Gibraltar—that's another clue in favor of Algiers," I said.

He sighed. "Twelve, fourteen, maybe sixteen dealers big enough to handle it. Well, I guess we can go to the cops and start having them tossed."

"Canvassing won't do it," I said. "After we hit one or two of them the rest will get the word. They'll all go to ground. No—we've got to hit the right target with our first shot."

"That calls for fancy shooting."

I said, "We'll need a Judas goat."

* * *

I WENT through all the station's Immigration Surveillance Reports for the past week and selected a card from the stack:

Andrew Grofield—entered Algiers 10/17 via GibAir #7415, carrying U.S. Passport #378916642393 in name of Alan Kelp. Passport presumed forgery. Inquiry forwarded to Washington to dip bag 10/18. Algeria authorities not informed. Ident Grofield made by Peter McKay, personal observation airport. File #78BV8.

Atherton said, "Grofield. Yeah. Ran some small arms into the Philippines while I was on station there. We had to chase him out. He was supplying guerrillas with AK-47s. He's a petty crook, not a big shot."

"Does he know your face?"

"We never met. I know him from photographs."

"He ought to do," I said.

* * *

ATHERTON SENT four men out in two cars to look for Grofield. On the second day one of them found him. Atherton said, "It's a girl's flat in the casbah."

"Has he got a hotel booking?"

"No. Staying with the girl. She's a professional. He'll be paying for the time. It suggests he doesn't plan an extended stay in town."

"Good. If he's got appointments in another country he'll be anxious not to be delayed."

"When do we hit him?"

"After I have my dinner."

* * *

WE SENT the two stringers around to cover the rear and posted ourselves in a cramped 2CV at the curb across the street from the stucco warren in which the Turkish call girl had her flat. Lights burned in her windows and I was hoping they'd soon emerge to go somewhere for a late supper; it was about ten o'clock. The street was emptying of pedestrians: burnoused bedouins, besotted beggars, business-suited bwanas. We were on the edge of the casbah, its tortuous passages winding away over cobblestones. The smells were pungent, the air heavy. One wonders if the Arab cities attract miscreants and evildoers because of their rancid foetid atmospheres or whether it's the other way round.

They didn't come out that night. We wasted it in the car, talking about the old days. Another team took over during the day and we were back the next evening at sundown.

Finally the girl and our mark emerged from the narrow dark entrance. Atherton said, "That's him. Grofield."

The man was burly in white seersucker; he walked like a sailor, a belligerent thrust to his shoulders. The girl had the opulence of a belly dancer: she'd soon be fat.

We gave them a lead and I got out to follow them on foot. Atherton trailed along at a distance in the car in case they snagged a taxi.

* * *

We were at the bar when Grofield came away from his table to seek the men's room. He was a little drunk; that was an aid to me. I stepped back from the bar talking heartily to Atherton with wide gestures: "So would you believe the lousy crook tried to sell me Cianti for Bardolino?"

My gesticulating arms made Grofield hesitate and then Atherton stepped out from the bar toward me: "Come on, Joe, you're blocking traffic." In reaching for my arm Atherton lost his balance and blundered against Grofield. I steadied Grofield and leered at him drunkenly, brushing him off. "S'all right, buddy, sorry, these freeways are murder, ain't they."

Atherton blurted apologies to Grofield in French and English. Grofield brushed us off with a stony glare and squeezed past and went on toward the gents. I had my hand in my pocket; I turned and walked out of the place. A few minutes afterward, having paid the tab, Atherton followed me out. "Okay?"

"Sure," I said. "I missed my calling. I should have been a dip."

* * *

In the morning I went into Atherton's office and reclaimed the passport from his desk. "Did you get a report on it yet?"

"It's phony all right. But a good forgery."

"Then he'll insist on the best when he goes to buy a replacement."

Atherton and I exchanged smiles.

* * *

SINCE HIS original passport was a phony Grofield couldn't go to the Embassy for a replacement of the one I had stolen from his pocket. That was what we were counting on. He'd have to buy a replacement from an under-the-counter dealer. He wouldn't settle for the kind of counterfeit that most ignorant fugitives would buy; Grofield knew the ropes. We were counting on that.

Atherton's four operatives kept a tight tail on Grofield. He emerged that morning from the call-girl's flat with rage on his face and went around Algiers by taxi from one shop to another. All together he visited five of them. We kept records of all five addresses. Four of them were on Atherton's list of known dealers; the fifth was added to it.

"We hang back," I said. "At the moment he's just shopping. Looking for the best paper. Keep the reins loose but don't lose him." I wasn't interested in how many dealers he visited; the one who concerned me was the one to whom Grofield would return.

* * *

HE GAVE us a scare that night: he disappeared. He must have used the back door of the girl's building and slipped away into the shadows. When the girl emerged alone from the building in the morning one of Atherton's men went in wearing the guise of a municipal electric-service repairman and the flat was unoccupied. We did quite a bit of cursing but Grofield returned to the flat in the afternoon, using a key the girl must have given him. He was fairly well drunk

by his walk. We sent the electrical repairman back in. He knocked at length and there was no reply so he got through the lock again and found Grofield happily passed out; he went through Grofield's clothes and found no passport and reported back to us.

Atherton said, "I don't like it."

I said, "It's still running. Look, he didn't come to Algiers for fun. He's got business here, never mind what kind. He must have transacted it during his absence—that was the reason for the secrecy. He didn't think he was being followed but he made the standard moves anyway. A pro always does. He's probably bought a few cases of rifles and grenades from somebody. Now he'll be ready to leave the country—all he's got to do is wait until his new passport's ready."

"Suppose you're wrong, Charlie?"

"Then I'm wrong and we start over again with another Judas goat. In the meantime we'd better beef up the surveillance on him. Can you spare another two men for a day or two?"

"I can scrape up a couple."

"Stake him out front and back, then. Let's not lose him again."

* * *

He led them a merry run that night; we thought we were onto something but it turned out to be a meeting with a Lebanese armaments smuggler in the back room of a country store about forty kilometres inland from Algiers. Our men watched with eight-power night glasses and had a glimpse of black steel, most of it crated: Kalashnikovs and, they guessed, Claymore mines. "That's what he's here for," I told Atherton. "He's making a buy. The stuff will go out by boat. Eight weeks from now it'll turn up in Thailand or Indonesia."

"We'll keep tabs on it," he agreed, "find out where it goes. But this isn't getting us to the passports."

"You want to bet?"

* * *

ONE OF the paper dealers on Atherton's list was the proprietor of a half dozen curio shops, one of which was situated in the rue Darlan. At eleven in the morning Grofield left his flat, walked two blocks, flagged a taxi from a hotel rank, rode it to the waterfront, walked through an alley, picked up another taxi at a cruise-shop pier, got out of the second taxi at the western end of the casbah wall, almost lost our operatives in a network of passages, and finally led them back to the rue Darlan—his second visit to the curio shop in three days.

"All right," Atherton said. He was exulting. "Let's give it a toss."

"Not yet," I told him. "Let's make sure."

Grofield went to the airport that evening and bought a seat on the nine o'clock flight to Geneva. When he checked in at passport control one of Atherton's men had a look at his papers and reported back to us: "You were right. The contents are fake but the booklet is genuine. How did you know?"

Atherton said, "Do we toss the shop now?"

"No. They wouldn't warehouse the blanks in the shop. If we raid the shop we won't find the shipment. We'll wait for them to lead us to the blanks."

We picked another transient out of the file that night and I did my pickpocket number on him the next afternoon; the transient was no help—he bought a cheap forgery from a bartender in the Avenue Faisal. We had to track three crooks through Algiers before one of them went into the curio shop in the rue Darlan to order a replacement pass-

port. After that it was simple procedurals. A clerk from the curio shop led us to a house on the mountainside in the high-rent district; when he came out of the house the clerk had a 6x9 manilla envelope with him. We took it away from him and found a mint passport blank inside. That evening six of us raided the big house. We found the cartons of blanks in a safe in the basement. We turned the owner of the house over to the Algerian authorities.

It was anticlimactic. We recovered the passports but didn't touch Bertine, let alone Dortmunder. To this day both of them are buying and selling illicit good around the Mediterranean; we ourselves are among their steady customers. Such is the cynicism of the trade.

But I did have the satisfaction of beaming in Myerson's sour face. Once again he'd given me a job he thought couldn't be done; once again I'd showed him up. I think he lives for the day when I foul one up.

He actually offered me a cigar. He knows how much I hate them. Without even bothering to acknowledge the offer I turned to leave the office after handing in my report. Myerson said, "All right, since you're obviously dying for me to ask. How'd you bring it off?"

"Genius. A tablespoon with every meal." I smiled cherubically at him.

If Myerson thinks I'll give him the satisfaction of telling him how I brought it off, he's crazy. Let him try to figure it out for himself. Maybe he'll get so worked up he'll blow one of his fuses.

* * *

Charlie's Chase

"I'VE GOT A PAPER CHASE for you." Myerson was unusually mellow. He neither bared his teeth nor puffed cigar smoke in my face. "I want you to look through the Hong Kong reports for the past ten weeks."

"What for?"

"You tell me."

* * *

WHEN I returned to his fourth-floor office he cocked his head to one side. "Well?"

"Some weeks ago someone began systematically to double our China agents."

"So it would seem. I wanted to make certain of my readings of the reports—that's why I didn't give you any hint what to look for. But you saw it too."

"It's a visible pattern."

"Yes. Well, you'd better get out there and put a stop to hadn't you." Then for the first time he smiled. Myerson's smile would frighten a piranha. It meant only that he hoped I would end up in trouble to my hairline.

As I went to the door he said to my back, "You've got to go on a diet, Charlie. You hardly fit through doors any more—you haven't got any sideways." He was still smiling —a wicked glitter of polished teeth.

* * *

I CAUGHT the noon flight from Dulles. The next day, fuzzy with jet lag, I descended upon the China Station.

Pete Morgan, the chief-of-station, was dour and dismal, his normal hey-buddy ebullience crushed under a weight of worry. I had known him for years and never seen him so morose. "I've been wondering when somebody would show up with a hatchet. In a way I'm glad it's you, Charlie. You're tough but you're fair. I never heard of you railroading anybody just for the sake of marking up a score on your record sheet."

"I'm obliged for the vote of confidence, Pete, but if you know about the trouble why haven't you done something about it?"

"You think I haven't? I've given seven men the chop so far. Two of them damned useful informants."

"You've interrogated them?"

"Certainly."

"And?"

"Four of them denied it. Three of them admit it." He showed his despair. "They *admit* they've been bought. Bribed with huge sums in Swiss banks and new passports and visas that will set them up in South America like baronets."

I stood at the window of his office and tried to make sense of it. Below me the Kowloon traffic of pedestrians and cars and tricycle-rickshas thronged the narrow street. I said, "The whole point of doubling an agent is not to let his employers know he's been doubled."

"Exactly. They're busting all the rules."

"So they're not really being doubled, are they."

He said, "I can only see one answer. They're trying to destroy my network."

"Why?"

"You tell me and we'll both know."

Pete's network wasn't concerned with mainland China; that was another—and far more vast—outfit with headquarters in Langley itself and branch monitoring stations in Kyoto, Seoul, Hong Kong, Taipei, Rangoon and Delhi. Pete's more modest operation covered Singapore, Djakarta, Formosa, Macao and Hong Kong itself—the seething corrupt smuggling ports of the western Pacific. We had substations in each of them but their operations were under Pete's direct control. And it appeared he was right: someone was systematically tearing the network apart.

Pete said, "It's so damned methodical. Like a bulldozer. I don't know who and I don't know why. We used everything but rubber hoses on the seven people we've busted so far. I'll show the interrogation reports. Three of them cooperated, more or less, but all they know is they were offered six-figure bribes. The offers came by phone from public call boxes and everything else came in the mail, plain envelopes, untraceable. Now I've got taps on most of my remaining agents' phones—if the opposition calls again maybe we can get voiceprints."

It was a crude destructive attack without any of the clandestine finesse that usually characterized warfare in our field—it was as if someone had decided to conclude a game of chess by blasting all the pieces off the board with a fire hose.

"I don't know how to fight this kind of thing," Pete complained. "It doesn't make any kind of sense. They must know they're doing it—and they just don't care. What kind of espionage is that?"

I said, "It's a cover for something. They want us to be deaf and blind so that they can pull off something they don't want us to know about."

"They. Who's they?"

"Anything could be happening out there—right now we wouldn't know about it, would we."

"If you want the ball, Charlie, I'll be happy to toss it over in your court."

Yes, I thought. That was why Myerson had picked me for the job. He hates me so much that he drops all the dirtiest ones in my lap.

Pete said, Does Langley want my scalp?"

"Not yet. They're as baffled as you are. Nobody's putting the finger on you."

"Ultimately it's my responsibility. The buck stops here."

"Why didn't you make a full report on this?"

He was surprised. "I did. To the Security Executive."

Myerson.

"Didn't you read it?" he asked. "I thought that was why you came."

Myerson, I thought. Myerson and his "need-to-know" compartmentalization. He'd had Pete's report in his drawer all the time but he'd withheld it from me. I could picture his mock-sweet smile: *I didn't want to clutter your head with Pete Morgan's prejudged opinions, Charlie. Better you go into it with an open mind.*

I said, "Let me have those interrogation debriefiings. And you can have sandwiches sent up?"

Didn't you have breakfast at the hotel?"

"I did. But I'm hungry."

* * *

THE AGENCY keeps threatening to put me out to pasture and Myerson keeps intervening in my behalf—not because he likes me but because he needs me: without me to sweep up his messes for him he'd be out on his own ear.

One of the reasons the Agency hasn't made good its threat to retire me is that my head is a computer-bank of facts, experiences and associations stretching all the way back to the days of the OSS when I cut my teeth in the

trade. Often a remembered iota will put me on the track of something vital when the same trivial item might pass straight over the heads of the pushbutton whiz kids in Covert Operations. It pays to keep one fossil around for the sake of continuity.

It was such an item from the deep past that provided me with a pointer toward the solution of this case. Going through the transcripts of the interviews with the three doubled agents who'd confessed, I found a clue that kept appearing like a bad penny.

"And then this voice on the phone said I could live out my days in paradise with the visas and all that money."

"He said I'd be able to quit grubbing around in these stinking Macao sewers and move my whole family to paradise."

"He asked me how I'd like to be rich and carefree and spend the rest of my days in paradise."

It echoes in my mind various conversations I'd had down through the years with Karl Jurgens. A slim and possibly misleading hint to be sure; but Karl had been smitten with the idea of a paradise for his retirement. It was one of his favorite words.

* * *

"KARL JURGENS?" A look of alarm passed across Pete Morgan's face. "He's a scary one. But didn't he retire from the Abwehr?"

"Some years ago."

That made him dubious. "If that's all you've come up with, it seems to me we're back to Square One."

"Just the same I want to send out a few coded cables."

The replies to my cables trickled in during the next twenty-four hours. In the meantime Pete's office was a shambles, trying to deal with three more defections that

had come to light. Pete's security people dragged one of them in for questioning and I sat in. The compromised agent was a Chinese cleaning lady with a sheepish expression; she kept shaking her head apologetically and wringing her hands. "I knew I should not have accepted this temptation but it was so very much money—enough to support my children in comfort for the rest of their lives. Not like the bits of money you pay me." She gave Pete a pathetically defiant look.

He made a face and said in an aside to me, "I ought to get a transcript of this to those cheap idiots who keep trimming our budgets."

I drew the woman's attention. "What did he say to you when he made the offer? Do you remember his words?"

"Not really, sir. It was just a voice on a telephone."

Pete said, "We got a voiceprint—the call was taped. The man spoke Mandarin Chinese with a Peking accent."

"More people in the world speak Mandarin Chinese than any other language," I said drily. "In any case it's probably a red herring. This isn't a Chinese operation."

"What makes you think that?"

"The Chinese have been dealing in subtle intrigue for three thousand years. This isn't their style—it's far too crude." I went back to the frightened woman. "Did he offer you anything specific besides the money and visas?"

I was fishing for a word but I didn't want to put it in her mouth.

She sighed wistfully. Her head tipped back and she murmured, "He offered me paradise."

* * *

I ASSEMBLED the cables in order and dropped them on Pete's desk. "He's been living in retirement on Tahiti."

"Karl Jurgens? He found his paradise then."

"But he's not there now." I indicated the cables.

Pete sat up and looked.

I said, "He left eleven weeks ago on a plane for Djakarta. Coincidence? Within a week of his arrival in Djakarta you started losing agents. Djakarta, Taipei—he was sighted there two weeks later—they're both major substations on your network and that's where you lost the first two agents. If we keep digging I'm sure we'll find traces of him in Macao and here in Hong Kong. It's Karl all right. No doubt of it."

"But what's he up to? Surely the West German government can't be running this caper. They're on *our* side—aren't they?"

"It's not a German caper. It's got to be a free-lance job. He's hired himself out as a mercenary. Probably started to run short of money to sustain him in paradise."

"Hired himself out where? Who's the villain and why's he doing these things to us?"

"I guess I'd better ask Karl," I said.

* * *

KARL JURGENS and I had formed a warm friendship during the hottest of the Cold War years and I didn't enjoy the prospect of dismantling him but I'd had unpleasant jobs before and I didn't intend to do halfhearted work on this one. If Karl had set himself against us he could expect no quarter from us; I had little sumpathy to spare for him.

The first task was to find him. I couldn't employ Pete's people for the legwork because I didn't know which of them might have been compromised; there were too many rotten apples in that barrel. So I had to use Myerson's authority to call in security people from Kyoto and various floating departments. The hunt fanned out across East Asia and the Malay Archipelago; I directed the operation from our communications center at Guam.

Gradually reports began to drift in from Mindanao, Tokyo, Rangoon, Macao, Singapore—Karl was careful but he had left a bit of a spoor here and there, partly because he'd gone a bit rusty from disuse but mainly because he probably felt no one would have reason to be looking for him. It was only an accident that I'd been able to connect the defections with him.

It appeared he was all over the map; we kept finding his trail twelve or twenty-four hours too late.

During that week Pete Morgan found the rot had spread to four more agents. He had no choice but to spread the dictum throughout his network that all agents in the system were under suspicion and surveillance until further notice.

Whether the threat succeeded was not immediately clear but defections appeared to be on the decrease: either the agents were impressed or Karl was laying off, or perhaps his job was concluded. I suspected the latter because none of Pete's agents came forward after the middle of that week to report attempts to bribe them.

By then we had lost seventeen agents—about twenty percent of the station's complement—and this made the issue so grave that Myerson personally flew out to Guam to light a fire under me.

I gave him a cool welcome. Myerson has no head for tactics. He was not going to be any material help and I didn't want him underfoot.

He favored me with his most menacing smile. "I'm not interested in your preferences, Charlie. I want this thing wrapped and I intend to sit on you until you wrap it. I'm getting flak from stations as far away as Beirut and Marseilles and even Mexico City—a flood of trouble coming in from the Far East without any prior warning from China Station. We've got to get this network back in operation before the trouble spreads all the way into Langley."

I gave him a cold eye. "If you can do a better job than I'm doing then I'll stand aside but otherwise don't call me —I'll call you."

* * *

A STRINGER in Djakarta had his eyes open and spotted Karl Jurgens from the photo he'd memorized. The stringer phoned in from the airport and I was on the runway at Singapore with an armed crew when Karl's plane landed. We took him into custody and bundled him aboard a cabin cruiser. Out at sea I conducted the interrogation personally. No witnesses; but I had a tape deck rolling.

Karl was urbane and stoic. He managed a bleak smile. "I thought you must have retired years ago—you're even older than I am. If I'd known they would pit you against me I think I might have refused the job. I never was quite a match for you, Charlie. How did you tumble to me?"

"Legwork." I wasn't about to tell him how he'd revealed himself through his attachment to paradise. In a poker game you don't tell another player that he wiggles his ears when he's bluffing.

I said, "Who's footing the bill?"

"I've no idea."

"Don't force me to make tedious threats, Karl."

"The offer was made by telephone, just as my offers have gone to your agents by phone. I was given a list of names of agents to be subverted."

"And the visas, passports and millions of dollars?"

"The visas and passports were sent to me at a general delivery post office box in Djakarta. They came in a plain carton. If it matters it was postmarked Hong Kong. As for the millions of dollars in bribe money, it was mostly fictitious. The numbered Swiss accounts exist but they contain only a few hundred francs each."

"Then you intended to double-cross all these people who thought you were making them rich."

"I intended nothing, Charlie. I was paid in cash, through the mails, and I've done the job I was paid to do. I didn't ask my employer his intentions. If I had, do you suppose he'd have told me? It was only on my own initiative and from my own curiosity that I inquired into those Swiss accounts. After all, he had to give me the account numbers so that I could pass them on to the defectors."

"The Mandarin Chinese who made the phone calls for you?"

"An unemployed Formosan actor of no account. I paid him to make the calls. He read from prepared scripts. He knows nothing more than that. Forget him."

"You're telling me it's a dead end?"

He spread his hands and smiled faintly. "You have me in custody. That should solve your problem for the moment."

"Hardly. Why'd you do it?"

"Money. What else? It's hardly been stimulating to my ingenuity."

"Why did they choose you?"

"I suppose I'd let the word go out that I was available for free-lance work. And I flatter myself I still have a reputation for efficiency and secrecy. I cover my tracks fairly well—I doubt any man but you could have tumbled me. In any case I swear to you I have no knowledge of the identity of my employers."

"You weren't curious?"

"I was, but I curbed it. Does the postman care who the postmaster is? My job was simply to deliver mail and messages. Menial—beneath me, really, but the money was attractive." His smile dwindled and departed. "I'm an old man, Charlie. I take what I can get."

"Describe the voice on the phone."

"Disguised. Muffled with a handkerchief and artificial falsetto. High pitched, nasal. A man, not a woman."

"Language?"

"German. Not a native German accent. Possibly English, American, Australian, Canadian, South African—English-speaking at any rate, but the falsetto confused things. I couldn't be specific."

"All right. What was the operation designed to cover?"

"I've no earthly idea. That's the truth. I wasn't told and I didn't ask."

"You've certainly come down in the world."

"I'm an old beggar," he agreed. "You know, oddly enough, I don't think I've broken any laws. Isn't that curious? At least not to the extent that it could be proved in a court against me. What do you intend doing about me? Is Miles Kendig still in charge of your Security Executive?"

"No. Kendig's gone. Myerson runs the office."

Karl made a face. "Him. The ultimate Philistine bureaucrat. Well—what will you do with me?"

"Nothing. Go back to Tahiti and lie on the beach. You're too old."

"You're unkind but truthful."

"How much were you paid?"

"One hundred thousand marks. About forty thousand dollars. Plus expenses—I spent those. Air fares, so forth."

"Send an international money order for forty thousand dollars to the UNESCO children's fund. When you get the receipt send it to me in Langley. If I don't get it I'll come to Tahiti after you."

"What am I to live on?"

"Sorrow," I told him. "We'll send you a Care package now and then."

"You probably ought to kill me."

"I know," I said, "but I don't kill people. I never have and never will. It's one of the silly crosses I bear. *Auf wiedersehn,* Karl."

* * *

I MET Myerson in Pete Morgan's office in Hong Kong. The rains were intense. The narrow passages of Kowloon ran with rancid floods. I scraped my wet shoes on Pete's carpet and tossed my voluminous dripping raincoat on a chair and sank into the couch. "Have them send me up three or four roast beef sandwiches."

Myerson had commandeered the desk. He lit a Havana. "Do you ever stop eating?"

"It takes a lot of food to sustain all this. You wouldn't want me to faint from hunger."

"It might be good for a laugh." He squinted at Pete. "Any more defections since last week?"

"No, thank God. Things are easing back to normal. We've done some recruiting. It looks as if they—whoever they are—decided to abandon the attack rather than find a replacement for Jurgens."

Myerson growled, "I don't like leaving a file wide open. I want this one closed." He glared at me.

Pete said, "How can we close it? We haven't got any leads."

I said, "That's a matter of knowing where to look."

Myerson blew smoke at me and waited.

Pete flushed. "Look, this whole mess was my responsibility. I can't solve it but at least I can tender my resignation. It's the only thing I can do in good conscience." He dipped an envelope from his inside pocket and tossed it on the desk. "There's the resignation. Maybe I'll join old Jurgens in retirement on Tahiti."

His voice sounded bitter. He got up and went slowly

toward the door—too slowly: he was waiting for Myerson to tear up the letter of resignation. It was a bluff, meant to appear as a conscience-salve.

Myerson opened his mouth to stop him but I got in first. "If we refuse to accept that resignation, Pete, what will you do?"

He stopped and favored me with a sour smile. Then he shook his head. "Keep on going out the door, I guess. You've got to accept it. I blew this job. Everybody on the station knows it. Everybody in Langley will know it soon enough. How can I go on working in the Agency when everybody has good reason to ridicule me?"

"Would you accept a transfer?"

"I guess not. To tell you the truth I'm sick of the whole back-alley trade. I imagine I've been looking for an excuse to quit for a long time."

"Not to mention the wherewithal," I remarked.

"What?"

I said, "I'll accept the idea that you're sick and tired of the job. I'll accept the idea that you've wanted to get out for quite a while. But you haven't got enough time in, Pete. You're ten years too young for a retirement pension. What do you intend to use for money?"

"I'll get a job." He mustered a smile. "You can live cheap in Papeete, I hear. Maybe I'll become a beachcomber."

Myerson stubbed his cigar out. The room reeked of its noxious fumes.

I said, "Pete, sit down."

He didn't move; he only shifted his feet and his bewildered gaze—it fled toward Myerson, who said to me, "What's on your mind, Charlie?"

I said, "Not long ago we lost our station chief in Moscow, remember? We caught him selling secrets to the Comrades. The turnover in section chiefs is always pretty high, es-

pecially in the thankless unglamorous stations like this one. Gruelling work load, indifferent pay, not much patriotism left to bolster a man after the Bay of Pigs and all the assassination attempts and Vietnam and Watergate. It's turned into a me-first world, hasn't it. People see cynicism and corruption and greed all around them—they decide it just doesn't matter any more, there aren't any good sides or bad sides, the only thing to do is make sure you get your own piece of the action. We've seen it right here on this case with poor old Karl Jurgens. Twenty years ago it never would have entered his mind to betray his friends. But times have changed. Nothing's sacred any more. You agree, Pete?"

Pete exhaled a gust of air. "Yeah, Charlie, I guess I do."

I said to Myerson, "One of the chief functions of this station is to keep tabs on shipments of opium coming out of China and the Indochinese Montagnard country. Since we shut down the Saigon station that's been one of the main preoccupations of Pete's section."

Myerson said drily, "Is this supposed to come as news to me?"

"It might have rung a bell with you—it did with me—when you mentioned you'd been getting complaints about the lack of East Asian forewarnings in Beirut and Marseilles and Mexico City. That's one of the principal routes for the heroin traffic into the States."

Myerson sat up.

I said, "Suddenly a senseless caper knocks off agents on this station—which just happens to have the effect of drying up drug-shipment information all along the route to America, thereby opening up that route to God knows how much heroin traffic—maybe enough to stockpile the dealer honchos with enough drugs to last a year on the street. Is that a coincidence, Pete?"

Pete had nothing to say.

I went back to Myerson. "I don't know how much the opium people paid him to sabotage his own station. It must have been a hell of a lot of money—enough to finance his early retirement in style. In any case he was able to pay Jurgens out of it, forty thousand dollars, and set up several Swiss accounts, one of which probably is his own and contains the bulk of the money. Maybe he got half a million, maybe as much as a million. They can afford it. The heroin people deal in eight-figure sums."

Myerson said, "Let me get this straight, Charlie. Are you accusing Pete of blowing his own network?"

"With regret, yes."

Pete said, "I deny that."

"Naturally," I said. "The voice that hired Jurgens over the phone spoke German with an English-speaker's accent. Jurgens said it could have been an American."

"Proving nothing," Pete said.

"I agree. But neither does it rule you out."

"So?"

I said, "Jurgens was given a list of names of agents to be taken out. Those were the agents whose areas included the routes of the major drug shipments—Hong Kong, Taipei, Djakarta, Singapore and on toward the Middle East and France and Mexico. As chief of station you were the only executive with that information at your fingertips—the names and covers of all those agents. It couldn't have been anybody else, Pete. You doubled your own agents."

I turned to Myerson. "He wanted out. Maybe he can't be blamed for that. But he had to get rich first."

Pete said, "I deny it. It's ridiculous."

Myerson lit another Havana. "In that case you may as well go, Pete. I expect we're finished with you for the moment." He picked up Pete's letter of resignation and

put it into his pocket. "Now that we know what to look for we'll be able to put men on it. I wouldn't try to withdraw any money from Switzerland if I were you. Sooner or later we'll find evidence against you and then we'll come after you."

"Even if you have to manufacture fake evidence."

Myerson snarled. "What do you think this is? A game of croquet? You're all finished, Pete—accept it."

After Pete left the office I ate my sandwiches. Myerson glowered through his cigar smoke at the dreary rain outside the windows. "He won't do anything dramatic, will he?"

"No," I said. "Pete's a survivor. He'll keep running as long as he can."

"Do you want to chase him?"

"Give that job to somebody else. I want to get out where the air's cleaner."

"All right." Myerson certainly is mellowing. "I've got a job for you in Kenya. . ."

* * *

Charlie's Last Caper

MYERSON LIVED — if that is the word for his peculiar existence — in an ugly house hidden away in a green part of Virginia that might have been a posh suburb were it not for the railroad embankment below the back of the property. Myerson didn't seem to mind the noise of the trains — or if he did he probably consoled himself with the knowledge that the clattering freights had made it possible for him to buy the land for a song.

When I arrived in the rent-a-car he met me in the driveway. He looked grumpy and unstrung — I couldn't remember seeing him so nerved up.

"Did you check out a pistol?"

It was a revolver, not a pistol, but Myerson was indifferent to such distinctions and I didn't say anything; I answered him with a dry look. He'd asked me to requisition the thing and he ought to have known better than to ask me if I'd obeyed — it was another index of how rattled he was.

I squeezed out from under the steering wheel — it has been decades since Detroit last designed a car commodious enough for a man of my bulk — and showed him the weapon. He gave it a cross glance as if suddenly he couldn't recall why he'd asked my to bring it.

I said, "I'll use it for a paperweight if you like."

He clenched his jaw. I said, "I'll even let you borrow it to shoot rats in your woodpile but that's as far as I go. As

you know, I don't shoot people. Any fool can shoot people. I'm far too old to start being a fool."

"You're far too old and far too fat to be much use to anybody for anything else."

"I didn't hasten out here to let you sharpen your tongue on me, either."

"All right, Charlie. All right."

"What's the flap? Why here and not in the office?"

"They've got Internal Security people crawling all over the office." But he said it as if his heart weren't in it.

"I. S.? What for?"

"Who knows." He seemed bitter—more weary that I'd ever seen him. "Let me have that thing." He held out his hand.

When I hesitated his eyes burned briefly with the familiar arrogance of command. A few things ran through my mind but finally I let him take it.

"Wait in the car." He turned away.

"As a host," I told him, "you're a prince."

"It's a flimsy house, Charlie. I don't think the floors could take your weight." He trudged away.

The reason he hadn't invited me inside was that his wife Marge detested me. Myerson at one time had taken evident pleasure in explaining to me how loathesome and repulsive she found me. "You nauseate the poor woman, Charlie. You remind her of cancer cells."

That "poor woman" was a supercilious rail-thin dried-up clubwoman who played incessant golf, drank martinis from noon on, and wore hats with peonies on them. At least I assumed they were hats because she wore them on her head. Under the circumstances I didn't mind not being invited inside but I was curious to know what he wanted the revolver for. I wouldn't have put it past him to use it to murder his wife—it had my fingerprints on it, after all, and

it was checked out in my name—but even for Myerson, I thought, that would have been a bit raw.

He hadn't gone into the house. He'd walked away from me around the corner of the screen porch and disappeared into the trees back toward the railroad embankment. A fly inside the porch was banging against the screen trying to get out. I couldn't begin to fathom what Myerson was up to but I supposed it was possible he'd arranged a meeting back there in the woods with someone—one of ours or one of theirs. More likely one of theirs, I thought; that would explain his desire for a defense weapon.

But I resented his summoning me all the way from Langley just to deliver the revolver. I was the section's premier field man—not Myerson's bloody errand boy.

In the shade by the car I was working myself up to the tirade I was going to deliver to him when I heard the approach of one of the frequent freights that disturbed the peace thereabouts. The rataplan clatter grew to nearly earsplitting volume as the train went by. But even so I was certain the sound that punctuated it was the crack of a gunshot.

I'd heard too many of those to have mistaken it.

As I waddled into the woods I heard the train rumble away; it had dwindled nearly to silence by the time I came to the end of the copse above the embankment. I moved with care, staying just within the trees, not wanting to expose myself—I made too ample a target.

But nothing stirred along the embankment. Nothing at all—not even Myerson. He lay awkwardly asprawl on the grass.

He was dead.

* * *

I BROKE the news to the widow and made two phone calls,

the second of them to the police. Then by mutual consent I withdrew from the house and returned to the embankment. Myerson, even dead, was better company than Marge.

The revolver was gone. It looked as if someone might have taken it away from him and then shot him, either with that revolver or with another. Myerson hadn't died immediately. He'd crawled a few yards. The trail of blood-stains began some distance below him along the grassy bank; he'd been shot while standing right on the rim of the railroad cut. It was a brick retaining wall ten or eleven feet high. The grass sloped up from there to where he had collapsed and died.

I noticed one odd thing. He was wearing a shooter's glove—cloth with leather patches. I hadn't even known he'd owned one. He hadn't been wearing it when I'd given him the revolver; I'd have noticed it.

Before the police arrived I had time to reflect on several things—mainly Myerson and my long acrimonious relationship with him. It had never been pleasant for either of us but it had been symbiotic and his death was neither a pleasure nor merely an annoyance. It probably meant the end of my career.

By dying he'd achieved his revenge at last. It was too ironic for anger; I could only brood at his corpse and acknowdege his victory. The apple-polishing political hack had won the last round. The bastard had beaten me. Within a week I knew I'd be out on the street without a job.

At first I thought that was the worst of it.

* * *

THERE WAS the tedium of dealing with the police. Then Joe Cutter arrived—he was the one I'd phoned first. Of all the people in our sector of the Agency, Joe is the one I

want on my side in an emergency. He's too handsome for his own good and he's arrogant sometimes—he thinks he's as good as I am but he'll never quite achieve that—but he's leagues ahead of the others. Joe Cutter is a throwback; like me he works from premises of talent and experience and instinct, and he never forgets a thing. Unlike the new breed, Joe knows there are still problems you can't solve with computers and microfilm and hypodermics.

The County Medical Examiner was making his preliminary study; they hadn't moved the body yet. Technicians and detectives prowled around, seeking clues, and Joe Cutter said to me, "Myerson had four kids, I think."

"None of them worth a damn." A workaholic father and an alcoholic mother—what could you expect? The four Myerson children—three boys, one girl—were in their twenties and thirties now but none of them had amounted to anything. Myerson had been forever bailing them out of jams, financial and otherwise. It was one reason he'd been unable to afford a better house than this clapboard white elephant by the tracks.

"For their sake," Joe murmured, "I hope his life insurance was paid up." He looked down toward the retaining wall: two cops and a dog handler with a Doberman were scouting the grass. Joe said, "They won't find much. You said you heard a train go by just as the shot was fired? Whoever shot him probably jumped down on top of the train. They must move pretty slowly through that curve. Or maybe the guy was already on the train and shot Myerson from there. A tricky shot from the top of a moving freight car but I guess it's possible. Myerson could've come down here to receive a package, you know—something somebody was supposed to toss to him from the train."

The M.E. looked up at us. "He wasn't shot from the train. Powder burns on his shirt front. He was shot at close range."

Joe scowled at the bloodstained grass. "Then the train was the getaway vehicle. He used the train to mask the sound of the shot and then he used it to make his escape." Joe turned to me. "So who was he?"

I shook my head: no idea. But I knew one thing. The bastard who'd killed Myerson might have done the world a favor but he'd done me out of a job.

I said, "I don't suppose there's a chance in hell they'd give you Myerson's job."

"No. They'll give it to some hack who plays golf with the Director—somebody who's earned a political favor. The same way they gave it to Myerson in the first place." Joe looked bleak—partly, I'm sure, because he didn't relish the idea of having to break in a new section chief.

"Funny," I muttered, "all the dicey capers we've survived—Berlin, Moscow, all the tightropes and guantlets, and it ends here in the grass in his own backyard."

Joe regarded me glumly. "What was the piece?"

"Standard thirty-eight caliber issue from the Agency armory. Why?"

"It's not here."

"I know."

Joe said, "As a matter of policy the Agency keeps a sample bullet fired from each armory weapon. For ballistic comparisons. What happens if they dig this slug out of Myerson and it turns out to have been fired by the gun you signed out?"

"I know. They'll try to pin it on me."

"Everybody knows how you and Myerson felt about each other. He used to mention your name in the same tone of voice Napoleon must have used when he talked about Wellington."

I said, "You'd better search me right now. I haven't got it on me, but frisk me and make sure."

"All right. But it won't matter. They'll say you had plenty of time to get rid of it. Charlie—listen. You didn't kill him, did you?"

"And do myself out of a job? No. I didn't shoot him, Joe."

"And you don't know who did."

"No. I don't know who did."

"All right. Then we'd better find out what happened. Because if we don't, they'll hang it on you—and you won't just be terminated, Charlie. You'll be terminated with extreme prejudice."

"Why not just say killed? It's the damned euphemisms that'll do us all in, in the end."

* * *

WHEN I arrived next morning at the Agency there were long faces around the conference table. Joe Cutter wasn't there; this was Internal Security and the agent in charge was an amiable hatchet-man named Philip Grebe. He had small hard eyes and polished fingernails; his grey suit was too well tailored and his mustache too neatly trimmed—he was compulsive about details, a thorough and ruthless man but a fair one. He had an unpleasant job but he was good at it. I'd rendered a few favors and assistances to him in the past but that didn't count for anything now, not with a cool sort like Grebe.

"You understand this isn't a formal inquiry, Charlie. If we learn anything that's pertinent to the case and not subject to the security laws we'll pass it on to the county attorney in Virginia. But we're not officially empowered to investigate murder cases. If it turns out, for example, that his wife killed him for the insurance or to settle a domestic spat then we have nothing to do with the case. But if it proves to be a problem inside the Agency we want to know about it."

I said, "Was his insurance paid up?"

"To the hilt. He had outside policies in addition to his Civil Service insurance. Nearly half a million in benefits, all told. The beneficiaries are the widow and the four children—roughly a hundred thousand each."

"Five good motives for murder," I observed.

"Possibly."

"But they don't explain why he went down to the embankment with a loaded gun in his pocket, do they."

"Quite," Grebe said.

The silence that followed his comment was ominous.

Finally he said, "Shall we begin?"

"I thought we already had. You mind my asking one more question? I've been out of the country for a while, you know. I just got back day before yesterday. I'm not up on whatever's been going on here in Langley. Myerson mentioned something yesterday—said I. S. was searching his office. What were you looking for?"

"Sorry, Charlie. That's need-to-know."

"Then can you tell me if you've got any glimmering of why he might have wanted a revolver?"

"I can answer that one. The answer is no."

* * *

JOE CUTTER was on the phone when I went up to our section late that afternoon. When he cradled it he said, "How was it?"

"They're friendly enough. But they think I blew him away."

It was a bit of a jolt to see Joe in what had been Myerson's chair. He said, "I'm acting chief until they appoint a replacement for him. It's no fun, let me tell you. His papers are in a mess. I. S. was in here all day going through the stuff. They'll be back again tomorrow."

"What are they looking for?"

"They didn't say."

I glanced at the row of locked filing cabinets. "How far did they get?"

"They're up to P to Q. Third cabinet, top drawer."

"Have you got the keys?"

He brooded at me. "What do you think you'd find?"

"Something that might tell us who he had the appointment with on the embankment."

Joe considered it. "We haven't time. They'll be back in here at eight in the morning."

"That gives us fifteen hours. Look, we'll start with the R-S drawer—if there was anything in the earlier drawers they'd have found it."

"Anything that vital, he'd have coded it into the computer and shredded the papers."

"Joe, at least it's worth a try."

"Maybe. But don't count on anything turning up." But I knew he'd given in.

We set to work and it was drudgery: we had to read every sheet of every document in every folder and some of them were in code and I am not one of your speed readers. Most of it was routine stuff and after several hours I began to believe Joe was right. After all, Myerson hadn't been stupid enough to have left anything too sensitive in those files. He'd been as security-conscious as anyone in our business and he knew where the on-off switch was located on the document-shredding machine. There were no naked records of our ongoing clandestine capers or any of that lot; most of it was standard administrative and personnel and budgetary material. Requisitions and vouchers and the like. Crushing boredom.

At half-past six in the morning Joe slammed the V-W drawer shut and jammed both fists into the small of his

back and reared back, stretching his cramped back muscles. "Nothing—unless you count my expense vouchers for the last Warsaw trip. Maybe he planned to blackmail me with them."

I read slower than Joe does; I was still at the beginning of my last drawer, the X-Y-Z tray. I closed up the *Xerxes* file—that was the code-name of a double-agent we were running inside the Soviet Embassy in Tokyo—and flipped past the metal "Y" tab. The first file behind the tab was marked *Yevshenkovich, M.* One of the defectors we'd brought over a few years back. I didn't open the file; I merely scowled at it. "Joe? Have a look."

He came sleepily to the drawer and blinked slowly at it. "What about it?"

"Think about it, Joe. What's missing?"

He looked at me. "Yeah." He touched the metal "Y" tab. "The first file under 'Y' is Yevshenkovich but that's wrong, isn't it. Yaskov. We're missing our old chum Mikhail Yaskov." Then his face lengthened. "No. It's probably in the Inactive files. Yaskov's officially retired from the KGB now."

"But he's still doing business from the Black Sea retirement villa. Yaskov's no more inactive than I am. I've filed half a dozen reports on him myself in the past eight months. They ought to be in here. No—Myerson removed the Yaskov file. What was he trying to hide?"

Joe was already on his way to the far cabinet: *Inactive.* He bent over the bottom drawer and lifted a folder out. "He wasn't hiding anything. It's right here—see for yourself."

I did and he was right. Baffled, I flipped it open. *Yaskov, M.* Inside were all the reports I'd filed, as well as data from a hundred other sources.

And mixed right in with it was the evidence that could put me in prison for forty years—or more likely in the crematorium.

* * *

JOE WAS glum. "Istanbul—tenth October. You were there, right?"

"Yes. Myerson sent me on a wild goose chase."

"Vienna, third April?"

"Yes. Interpol conference."

"Helsinki, fourth June—same again?"

"That was a legit job but it didn't pan out."

"Apparently Yaskov was in the same towns on the same dates. According to this, you met Yaskov secretly and didn't report any of the meetings to Myerson."

"I didn't have any meetings with Yaskov, Joe." I flipped a page in the file. "Source—M.S. Source—M.S. The same notation on every one. Who's this mysterious 'M.S.' who's been following me around?"

"Or following Yaskov around. That's more likely, isn't it."

"Joe, I know every executive in this section and none of them have the initials M.S. on their real names or their code names or any other names."

"Could be another section. Hell, it could be NSA or military intelligence or any one of half a dozen branches." He studied me with canny speculation. "The way it looks, Myerson called you on the carpet about these secret meetings with a Soviet agent. And you—not knowing Myerson had left written evidence in the files—killed Myerson to keep him from having you terminated for treason."

"Come on, Joe. Come on. Why on earth would Myerson order me to draw a revolver from the armory if he thought I was a traitor?"

"We only have your word for it that Myerson asked you to requisition the piece. It wasn't Myerson who signed it out. It was you."

And that was, indeed, the weapon that had killed him. The I.S. people had confirmed that twelve hours ago. The inquiry was to continue today and Grebe had left me to understand that if I didn't come up with satisfactory answers I was in for a grueling grilling.

I walked to the L-M drawer and pulled Myerson's own travel-voucher file; I went through it quickly, having a look at hotel and airline receipts. The shape of this thing was emerging from a mist in my tired mind and when I looked up at Joe I think I managed a grin. "I think I know who killed Myerson. I need a few more facts but at least I've got an idea where to look."

"Take it easy before you jump to confusions, Charlie. You're running on your nerve-ends just now. The shock of all this and no sleep for twenty-four hours and you haven't even had a meal. . ."

"That kind of pressure—that's when I'm at my best. You ought to know that, Joe." I gave him my beaming smile. "It stirs up the adrenalin."

"Have you seen any evidence that I haven't seen?"

"Maybe just these." I showed him two vouchers from Myerson's travel records.

Joe looked at them but he didn't seem impressed. "That's clutching at straws, Charlie. I say again, take it easy."

"Easy? It's my neck they're measuring for a garotte."

He took the vouchers out of my hand and put them back into the file. "I don't see anything in those to prove anything against anybody."

"That's because you're still just a shade slower that I am. No offense, Joe. Maybe it's just that you didn't know Myerson quite as well as I did. Come on, we've just got time for breakfast before they start up the hearing again."

* * *

I WAS glad to have Joe's company at the I.S. conference table that morning and glad Grebe allowed him to sit in: that was a sign of the respect in which Joe Cutter was held throughout the Company.

Joe hadn't said anything soppy but he was there at my side and that was sufficient measure of his faith in me and in my innocence, and I needed that just now. It bolstered my weary soul—and I believe it inclined Grebe and his associates to give me more latitude than they might have granted me if Joe hadn't been there.

I said, "I hope I can clear this thing up before we waste any more time on false trails but I need to ask a few questions. May I?"

Grebe glanced at Joe Cutter and then said, "No blank checks, Charlie, but go ahead and we'll see."

"Myerson was wearing a shooting glove. Were there powder stains on it?"

"Yes."

"Recent?"

"Yes. But that's been explained. He'd been at his rod-and-gun club earlier the same day, sighting in a new deer rifle. His wife told us that. We examined the rifle. And the rod-and-gun people confirmed it. It's all true."

"I don't doubt it. All right. Any luck tracking down that freight train?"

"It's in Augusta. The FBI's searching it now."

"A hundred to one," I said, "but they may find that thirty-eight revolver in a hopper car with my fingerprints on it. I assume you've got the results of the paraffin test I took yesterday at the armory?"

"Yes. Negative. But you could have been the one wearing the shooter's glove at the time of the shooting."

"It wouldn't fit my hand, you know. But that's minor." I glanced at Joe. His eyelids looked heavy. Joe needs his

eight hours; he burns up energy fast—it's one of the disadvantages of being lean. I went on: "An I.S. team started tossing Myerson's office the morning before the day he died. Is that right?"

"Possibly."

"What were you looking for?"

"Sorry, Charlie."

"It's need-to-know, isn't it? I need to know it. It's my life on the line."

"No."

I said, "Then I'll have a guess, and you can correct me if I'm wrong. You had a tip, didn't you. Probably from a minor type in the Russian Embassy."

"I can give you this much," Grebe replied. "It was a telephone tip—anonymous."

"Telling you if you combed Myerson's records you'd find there was a traitor in his section." I smiled. "The tip came from Mikhail Yaskov. I don't mean it was necessarily Yaskov's voice on the phone, but it originated with him."

"What gives you that idea?"

I slipped the Yaskov file and Myerson's travel records out of the briefcase and Grebe sat bolt upright when he saw the name tag on the Yaskov file. "Who authorized you to—"

"I'm acting section chief," Joe murmured. "They're my files now, Phil. I authorized it."

I pushed the papers across the table and while Grebe examined them I said, "Myerson moved the Yaskov file to the Inactive cabinet. That's why your people would've needed another day or two to find it. But he meant to draw your attention to it by moving it. I'm sure he moved it there after he learned your people were on their way to shake down his office. As soon as he heard about the pending I.S. toss he knew he was in trouble. So he scribbled a few

phony reports from a nonexistent agent named 'M.S.'—probably 'myself'. The handwriting looks crabbed, as if maybe he scribbled it with his left hand, but I suspect it's Myerson's. The phony reports try to show that I had a series of secret meetings with Yaskov in Istanbul and Vienna and Helsinki. I never saw Yaskov in any of those places. The interesting thing is, Myerson's own travel vouchers show that Myerson himself was in Vienna on April third and in Helsinki on June fourth—the same days when Yaskov presumably was meeting me there. I didn't meet Yaskov, but I suspect Myerson did. Myerson wouldn't have turned traitor voluntarily, so I assume Yaskov must have had something on him. I have no idea what it was. But if you start looking for it you'll probably find it. Nobody's had reason to look for it before, have they."

Grebe lifted his eyes from the papers. He didn't speak at all. He only watched me, reserving judgment.

I said, "When the I.S. investigation came down, Myerson was in a trap and there wasn't any way out of it. He couldn't bluff it out because obviously Yaskov double-crossed him by tipping you. Yaskov always wanted to get Myerson and me out of the way—he's spent half his life tripping over us and we've bested him too often to suit him. When I bluffed him out of Finland a year or two ago it must have been the last straw. First he dug up something on Myerson. He blackmailed Myerson into compromising himself. Then he betrayed Myerson's treachery to you. Yaskov knew that would get Myerson out of his way—which also gets me out of the way, since without Myerson the Agency won't keep me on."

I gave Grebe an opening to speak but he only waited for me to finish; he knew I hadn't the punch line yet.

I said, "Myerson knew he'd get fired at the very least. No pension, half his insurance canceled. He might be dis-

credited, maybe go to prison, maybe be killed. I don't know because I don't know how serious the compromise was. Obviously Yaskov found some way to blackmail Myerson into doing the Russians a favor or two—and Yaskov must have kept the evidence of those favors. Whatever it was, Myerson had to know there was no way to get Yaskov off his back. So Myerson took the only way out but he hated me so much he had to take me with him."

Grebe sat bolt upright. "What? You're saying Myerson killed himself?"

"Of course he did. But he made it look like murder. Because the insurance wouldn't have paid off on a suicide. And he made me look like the killer—and the traitor—because he needed a plausible murderer. He set me up with the motive, the means and the opportunity."

Grebe settled back. "It's a clever hypothesis, Charlie, but there's no evidence to support it."

"There are bits and pieces. One thing is those travel vouchers. They show I wasn't the only one in the section who could have had those meetings with Yaskov. Another thing—why did he choose that morning to go shooting at the rod-and-gun club if he didn't need an excuse for the fresh gunpowder on his shooting glove? And why did he move the Yaskov file over to the Inactive drawer if he didn't want us to notice the shift? And there's one other thing he didn't take into account. It's true that I was in on April third but I was only there four hours—it was an airport meeting with several Interpol people to update our data on one of the terrorist groups and I was never out of sight of half a dozen police executives. I couldn't possibly have met Yaskov there, so that suggests all the 'M.S.' reports are fakes."

Grebe chewed a pencil; the rest of them smoked and reached for their styrofoam coffee cups and it was clear

what they were thinking: they were picturing Myerson on the lip of the embankment shooting himself in the chest rather than the head because he needed time to toss the revolver onto the passing train after he'd used it on himself; then dragging himself up away from the lip, not noticing the bloodstains he was leaving behind on the grass, and finally collapsing there and curling up like a strip of frying bacon, his last thoughts probably sour and resentful and filled with obscure regrets and rage. He'd been a bitter man always, a hearty politician on the surface with his clubhouse tan and his locker-room humor but that had been façade and the real Myerson had been a man who only took real pleasure in the suffering of others. He'd had fits of terrible depression throughout the years I'd known him. Tension and anxiety and inadequacy had characterized his life and suicide was not out of character for him, nor was his final parting shot—the attempt to frame his most intimate enemy for his own murder. That was what they were thinking, Grebe and his men.

Grebe said, "We'll take it under advisement, Charlie. Stick close to the shop until we let you know what's next, all right?"

* * *

In Myerson's office Joe Cutter and I shared out a brown-bagged lunch of liverwurst-on-ryes. Joe's teeth crunched a pickle. "You didn't prove the case for the defense," he said, "but at least you cast a reasonable doubt on the prosecution's case. But they're going to put you out to pasture all the same, you know. Gold watch and a pension. I wouldn't call it a triumph."

He looked up then, suddenly angry. "You deserve better, Charlie. I hate to see it end this way."

I gave him a smile. "It won't. This is not Charlie's last caper."

"Say again?"

"We'll never know whether I was right or wrong, will we. Not until we get the truth out of Mikhail Yaskov."

He went completely still, fingers poised on the pickle. "What?"

I said, "Yaskov's the only one who *knows*, Joe."

"Come on. You're not going after Yaskov. On your own? Behind the Iron Curtain? At your age? Charlie, you can't be serious."

I grinned, though. "I guess I can."

* * *

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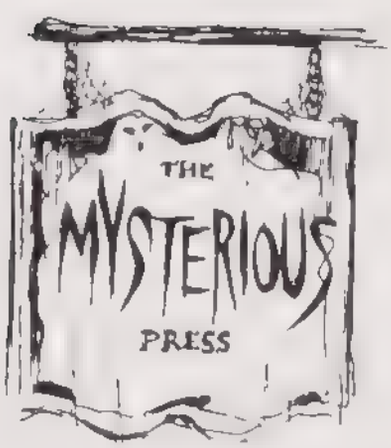

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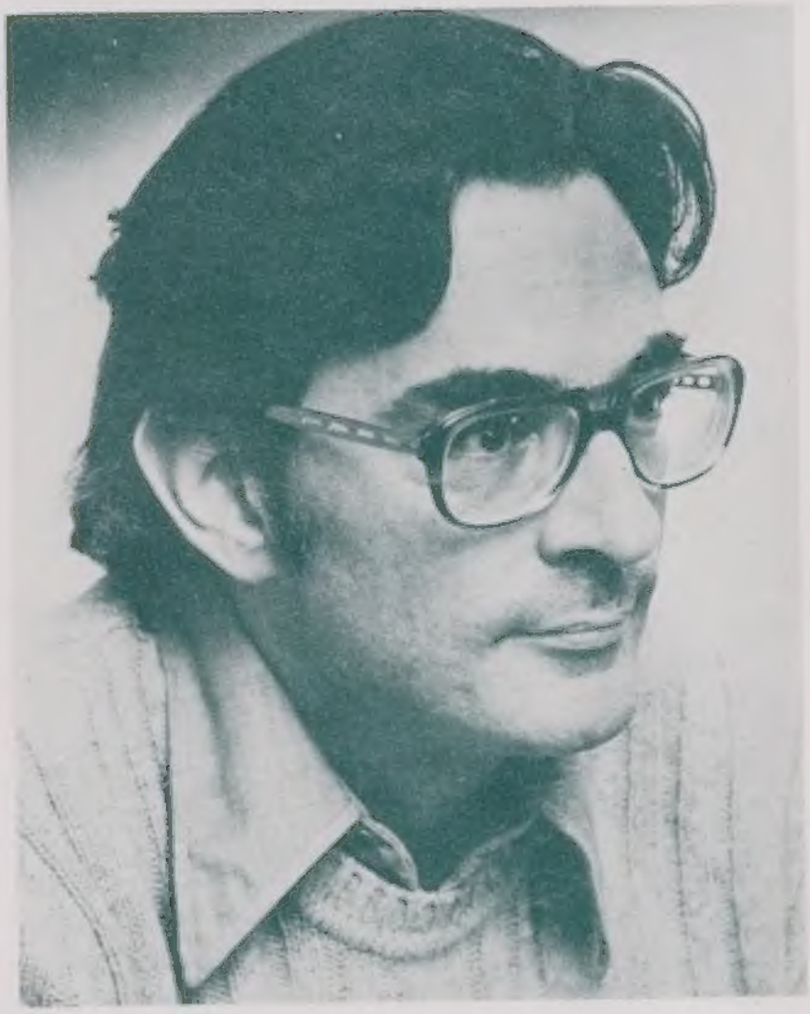

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